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pseud of

Francis Edward Grainger

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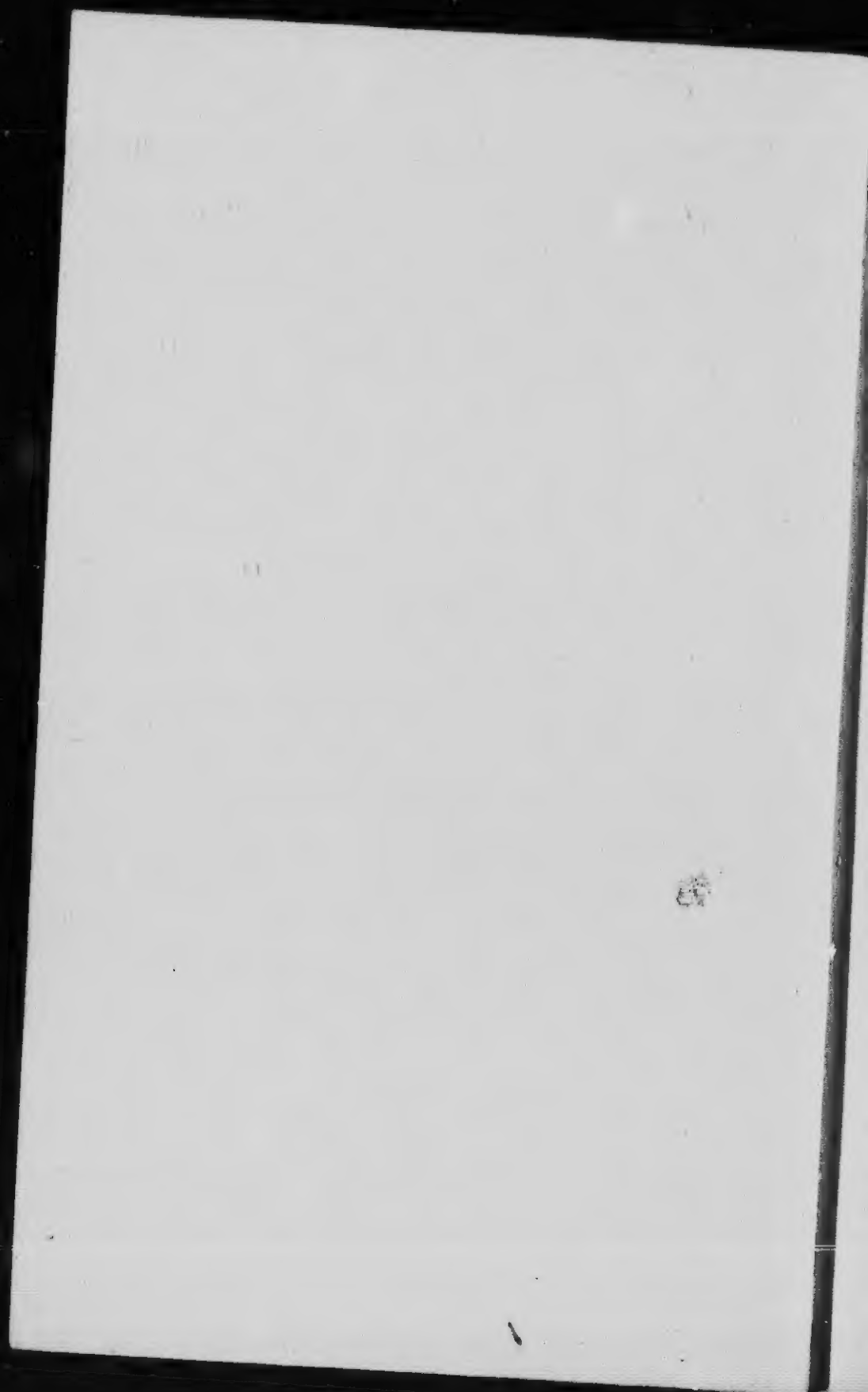
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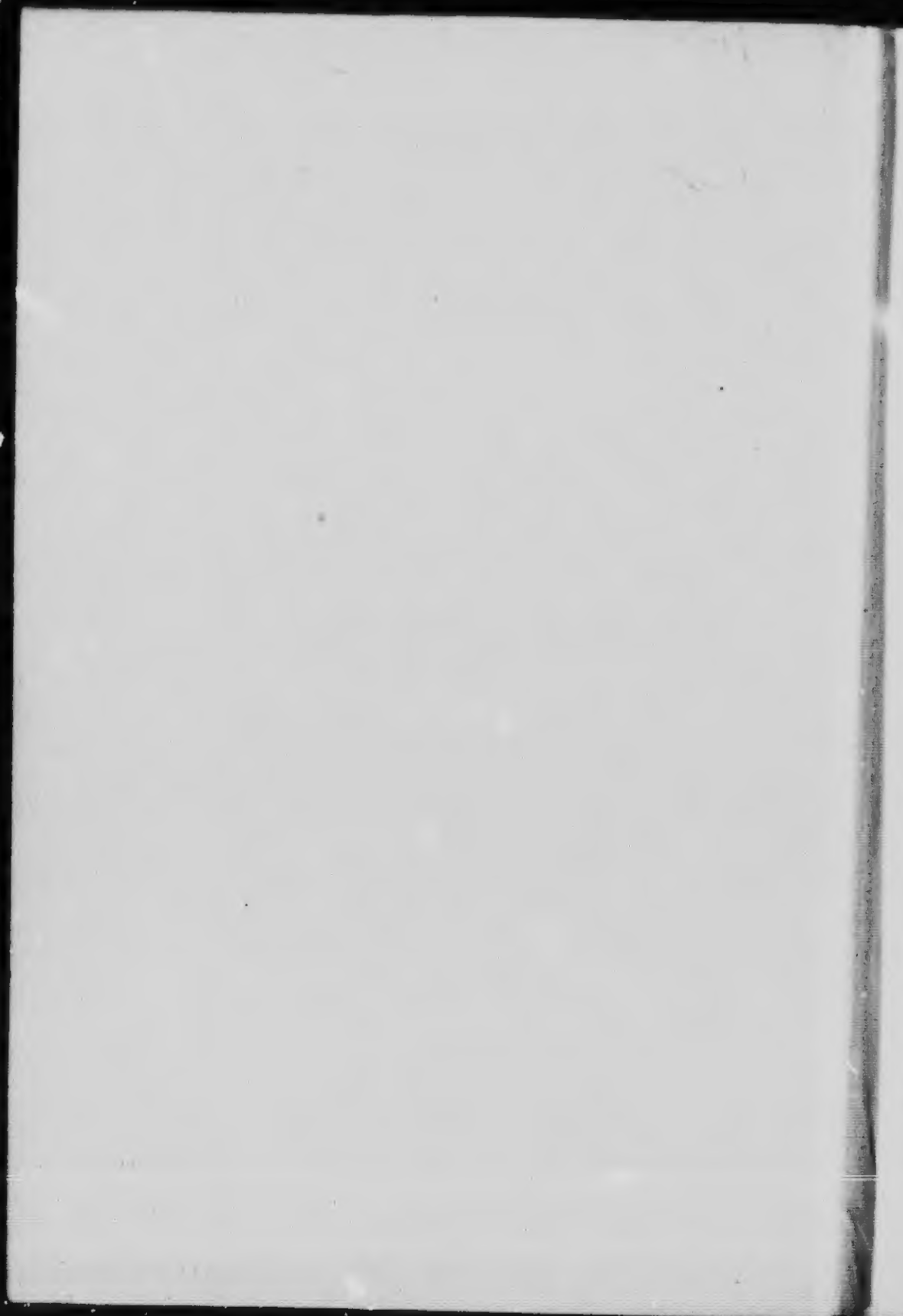
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THE AVENGERS.





" Raising herself on tip-toe, pressed her warm lips to his."

(Page 75.)

The Avengers]

[Frontispiece

THE AVENGERS

BY
HEADON HILL

AUTHOR OF "THE DUKE DECIDES," "A RACE WITH RUIN,"
"MILLIONS OF MISCHIEF," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY S. H. VEDDER

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THE AVENGERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE WINDOW IN THE STRAND.

A DIMINUTIVE, sharp-eyed boy was dusting a well-worn, leather-covered easy chair in the outer office of Mr. John Quayne, the eminent private detective who practises at the western end of the Strand. The chair stood in the embrasure of an old-fashioned bay window on the first floor, for the house was one of those untouched as yet by County Council modernities. When he had removed the last speck of dust the boy busied himself with the lace curtains, draping them so as to give a view of the great thoroughfare to anyone sitting at the window.

Having finished his task, he bent down and with solemn fervour kissed the seat of the chair.

"What on earth are you doing, Badger?" came the amused inquiry from a man who had entered from the passage, and who at sight of the boy's strange performance had paused on his way to the private office beyond.

"Seeing if there was any dust left on the chair, sir," responded Badger diffidently, rising with a shame-faced blush. He had no great faith in

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the efficacy of his white lie, for his belief in his employer's omniscience dominated all his emotions—save one.

Mr. Quayne shrugged his shoulders and passed into his sanctum with a smile that set the lad's cheeks flaming a deeper red. As a student of human nature the detective would have been blind indeed if he had not noticed Badger's youthful passion for the beautiful girl who for the past three months had sat regularly three or four mornings a week at the window in the outer office. The smile faded on John Quayne's strong, clean-shaven face into a look of keen concentration as he opened the first of the pile of letters on his desk.

"Ah!" he muttered, running his eye over the gilt-monogrammed notepaper. "The young rascal put this on top, I suppose, because he knows her handwriting. Well, he will have to make the most of his time to-day if she means this. Personally I shall not be sorry to be off a case which never quite appealed to me."

The letter which he held in his hand ran:—

"GRANDISON MANSIONS,
"16th Sept., 1902.

'DEAR MR. QUAYNE,—

"I shall come to your office to-morrow and make one final attempt to achieve my purpose. If I am not successful I must abandon the idea altogether.

"Yours faithfully,
"MARION FERMOR."

Quayne laid the note aside, finished his correspondence, gave instructions to one or two assistants, and putting on his hat went out to attend to a big bond robbery which he was investigating for the *Comptoir d'Escompte*. As he passed through the ante-room he glanced at the window. It was still unoccupied, and the office-boy was hovering about disconsolate.

"Cheer up, Badger," Quayne chaffed him.

"She's coming this morning right enough."

"Same orders, sir?" the boy asked briskly, ignoring his chief's banter with a fine show of devotion to duty.

"Yes, hold yourself in readiness, as usual, to do just what she tells you," was the reply. And with a genial nod to his faithful little servant and admirer, John Quayne went out to weave his web round the quarry of the moment. A man without mercy for wrongdoers, but with a soft spot in his heart for women and children, he had gained the confidence of the public and won a unique position in his profession by always refusing divorce business. Such unsavoury cases he left to minor lights of the detective world.

When his employer had departed, Badger stationed himself at the window and was presently rewarded by the sight of a smart private hansom drawing to the kerb below. From the cab there leaped lightly on to the pavement a lady, who, after a brief instruction to the driver, vanished into the house. The boy, aglow with excitement, went out to the head of the steep staircase and leaned over the bannisters, watching

with reverential awe the top of a quietly millinered but very expensive hat rising towards him. Not till the girl who wore it reached the top stair did Badger disclose himself by a discreet cough.

"Your chair is all ready, miss. I've dusted it proper," he said, turning to usher the visitor into the office.

Marion Fermor caused Badger's heart to thump with the radiant smile she gave him. "I am sure you have, Billy; you always make me so comfortable," she said, as she entered the bare apartment and walked with the careless step of one accustomed to her surroundings to the chair in the window. The boy preened himself at the use of his Christian name. This was the only one of the clients who had been clever enough to find it out—and use it.

The girl sat down in the chair and drew off her gloves, disclosing firm but delicate hands. She was in her twenty-third year, so that not one whit of the beauty, which on her coming of age had made old Martin Fermor's heiress the talk of the town, had had time to fade. Her pure, virginal complexion, tinged with the warm blood of youth, added to the Brunette; her pouting red lips formed a veritable Cupid's bow; her figure, as she loosed the dainty driving-cape, showed the sinuous charm of ripe but early womanhood; her voice was rich and sweet. A girl to be won and loved for herself, rather than for the two millions at her back; yet here she was in a private detective's ante-room, on friendly terms with the office boy—and with a purpose to achieve.

THE WINDOW IN THE STRAND. II

She made a slight alteration in the drapery of the lace curtains and focussed her gaze on the opposite pavement, where the usual pedestrian traffic of the Strand was jostling, heaving and hurrying, eastwards and westwards, in two never-ending streams. The normal picture of the great human artery—the seamy side cheek by jowl with well-fed and well-dressed prosperity—was presented to the bright eyes at John Quayne's window, but it was always the seamy side that Marion Fermor's eyes sought and followed—the broken men with shabby boots, the "resting" actors and the shoddy-clad clerks. Her gaze dwelt even with greater intensity on lower levels still—on sandwich-men and beggars.

But with all her keen intentness Mr. Quayne's client was able, without relaxing her scrutiny of the kaleidoscope outside, to keep up a running fire of talk with the pert little Cockney urchin who had been detailed to her service.

"How are they all at Harleyford Road—Granny, and Uncle Tom, and Sister Sue?" she asked presently, with an air of real interest.

Badger slid towards her across the floor and took up his parable. "Granny's been at it again, miss, something cruel," he replied. "She gave uncle a clip over the ear when he tried to get the bottle away from her the other night, and he being a cripple couldn't tackle her proper, though a grown man. That's where my detective experience came in," added the boy proudly.

"What did you do, Billy?" Marion inquired,

successfully keeping all trace of amusement from her voice.

"I advised him to have an accident with the lock of the cupboard where the gin is kept—and give the old lady a rest from the stuff. It came off all right. By the time the locksmith had been, the crave had died out of her and she's quite respectable again," replied Badger.

"That was smart of you. And Sue?"

The boy's face clouded. "She's all right," he said reluctantly.

Marion noted the reluctance, and was too schooled in the world's ways to press her question about the elder sister of the quaint urchin whom she had attached to herself during these strange waits of hers in Mr. Quayne's office. That something was *not* right with "Sister Sue" was evident from Billy's manner, but Marion respected his desire for silence.

To relieve the tedium of her vigils at the window she had talked to the boy about his home life, and, beginning by simply "making conversation," she had at last become interested in his queer stories of the sordid Kennington household—of the grandmother who drank, of the crippled uncle who earned a pound a week by apparently doing nothing, of the pretty sister who was a waitress at an "A.B.C." shop. But her interest was merely perfunctory, and had won from the boy a good deal more whole-souled devotion than she was entitled to. The time had not yet come when that humble home was to have for her a very real and personal significance. She would

have been surprised indeed if told that such time would ever come.

Marion mused a while in silence, wondering vaguely as she watched the passers-by what was worrying the lad about his sister. Suddenly all such trivial speculations were pushed into the background of her mind. She leaned forward, slightly parted the draped curtains to gain a better view, then turned and beckoned Badger to her.

"That tall man in the shabby grey frock-coat—passing the hairdresser's. You see him?" she panted in great excitement.

"The broken-down toff?" assented Badger, half interrogatively.

"Yes; run out and bring him up. Say—oh, say anything. Say a lady wants to see him on business—something to his advantage."

"I tumble," responded John Quayne's understudy, and he suited the action to the word by literally tumbling down the stairs and out into the crowded Strand. Marion, her lips parted and a bright flush on either cheek, sat and watched him as he dodged through the traffic in the roadway, reached the opposite pavement and clawed at the sleeve of the threadbare coat.

"Billy's got him," cried the girl, leaning back with a sigh of relief. "He is the genuine article—if he will agree to terms."

And she schooled herself to outward composure while she waited for her youthful emissary to bring in the prize.

CHAPTER II.

"THE GENUINE ARTICLE."

WHEN Leslie Armytage left his cubicle at the King's Cross Rowton House on that memorable 17th of September he had exactly twopence in the world. Unless Fortune smiled during the day even the shelter of "the poor man's hotel" would be debarred to him on the succeeding night. He would have to walk out into the country and sleep under a hedge or a hayrick, for a seat on the Embankment was not to his liking.

The young man's appearance as he passed out into the street, though none too prosperous, did not denote the dire extremity of his need. His clothes were worn to the thread, but, being the work of a tailor of renown, they were making a gallant fight against the inevitable. Not till they dropped into shreds would they lose the distinction imparted by a cutter who was also an artist.

And it was the same with the wearer as with the garments. Thir almost to emaciation from poor living, he carried himself almost jauntily, with a not-to-be-denied cavalry swing, as he turned

his steps westward—instinctively, because of old habits, yet without present purpose. He had got to walk the streets, and he might as well walk those he knew—that was all.

For, human derelict as he was at eight-and-twenty, Leslie Armytage had committed no crime, nor even a social solecism, to make him ashamed to meet his fellow man. There was no reason, had he been able to pay his last year's subscription and so remained a member, why he should not have walked into the smoking-room of the Army and Navy Club and looked the most punctilious *habitué* in the face. His was a simple story, and one fast becoming all too hackneyed. The family solicitor had stolen the family cash, and from being the owner of the best polo ponies in the best polo regiment Leslie had descended by a few sharp gradients to being the owner of—twopence.

He loved open spaces, and with the intention of getting to Hyde Park by way of Piccadilly he made his way down to the Strand, taking the longer route because there was a call to make. This was at the office in Lincoln's Inn Fields where the affairs of the defaulter were being wound up. There was the barest chance that something might be saved from the wreck, and he paid that call regularly twice a week. This morning if there was only half-a-crown to come to him it would solve the problem of existence for the next day or two.

As usual the clerk's answer was a flippant negative. From the snug security of his eighty pound

salary he could not be expected to waste sympathy on the financial anxieties of a gentleman who had lived up to every penny of his eight thousand a year.

Armytage flung a careless nod at his prosperous informant, and with a grim smile went down and lost himself in the thick of the teeming Strand. He chose the south side for the sake of the shade, and he had passed the Hotel Cecil when a well-dressed man who had followed him from the corner of Wellington Street ranged alongside, took a good look at him, and fell back into a doorway, where he carefully scrutinised a cabinet photograph which he took from the breast-pocket of his coat.

The scrutiny seemed to satisfy him, for, replacing the photograph, he walked across to the post-office nearly opposite and despatched the following cablegram to an address in Chicago:—

"L. is loose again. Just seen him in the Strand. Send the others on."

In the meanwhile Leslie Armytage continued his walk westwards in complete ignorance of the interest he had aroused in the stranger's mind. Preoccupied with his own troubles, he had not noticed the man range alongside, or, if so, he had put it down to a case of mistaken identity speedily discovered. But he had not proceeded a hundred yards when he was once again approached, this time by someone bent on making his presence known—someone who plucked him by the sleeve.

The ex-hussar wheeled round and saw a natur-

"THE GENUINE ARTICLE."

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ally impudent, but for the moment intensely earnest, face looking up at him. Billy Badger was bursting with the burden of a great responsibility.

"If you please, sir, a lady wants to see you over there—on business to your advantage," he panted.

Armytage glanced up vaguely. "Where's 'over there,' my lad?" he said kindly. Badger's face attracted him, but he failed to understand the message. He had no female relations able to be of the least advantage to him, and he had been perfectly heart-whole at the time of his downfall. He had ever been a sportsman rather than a lady's man, and no woman's life had been touched by his dropping out from the world that had known him.

"I'm with Mr. John Quayne, the detective. There ain't any error. The young lady is in his office," replied Badger proudly.

In common with everyone Armytage knew Quayne's reputation, and it was good enough to assure him that, though he might be the victim of a mistake, there was no double dealing at the back of the request. His curiosity was piqued, and, pilowed by his youthful captor, he crossed the roadway.

"What is the lady's name?" he inquired ingenuously, as he mounted the stairs.

"Can't say," was the answer flung back by Badger over his shoulder.

"You'll rise in your profession, young man," Armytage laughed, as he stepped on to the landing.

A moment later he knew that though love had passed him by in the days of his wealth it had come to him now in his poverty, swift and sudden and very sure. That the tall girl who rose from the chair in the window was the one woman for him he knew almost before she had straightened herself to her full height to receive him. Leslie Armytage was the victim of one of those passions—not so uncommon as is generally supposed—which are none the less abiding because they have flashed into being “at sight.” He had scarcely eaten anything for days past, and the violence of this hopeless emotion caused him to tremble and look anything but his best.

Marion on the other hand, who regarded Badger’s captive merely as a pawn in the game she was playing, was a little eager but entirely business-like.

“I hope that you will excuse the liberty I have taken in asking you to step up,” she said. “But I thought that you might be willing to earn two thousand pounds. If not I can only apologise very deeply for the trouble I have given you.”

Armytage with an effort pulled himself together and smiled. The thing sounded like a fairy story. “My appearance certainly warrants the supposition that money would be useful,” he replied. “The sum you mention is a large one. May I ask what service you expect me to render in exchange for it, and, above all, why you have selected me?”

With a sigh of relief, Marion signed to Badger to leave the room, and sat down, indicating a

chair to Armytage, of which, however, he did not avail himself.

"Of course, I do not expect an answer till you have heard what I require of you," she said, speaking rather fast. "I chose you because you exactly resemble someone whom I want you to represent—the gentleman, in fact, to whom I am engaged to be married. I arranged with Mr. Quayne to have the use of this window till I found the man for my purpose."

"I see," said Armytage weakly, not seeing at all.

"I have been three months at it," Marion continued, "and you are the first one to pass the window so like Ni—so like the gentleman to whom I am engaged that it was worth while sending out to fetch you in. To put it briefly, and save your time if you decline my offer, he is in a lunatic asylum—not really mad, don't you know—and I want you to help me get him out."

The delicious feeling of romantic adventure which had been tugging at Armytage's heart-strings since he mounted the stairs crumbled to dust and ashes. How should it not when he was asked to assist in the liberation of one who must, at any rate, be a legally certified lunatic, so that the said lunatic might marry this beautiful girl who had captured him body and soul? But there remained the offer, so tempting to one in his circumstances, of two thousand pounds.

"What is your proposal?" he asked, fingering his shabby bowler hat nervously.

"That you should feign madness and, having

been duly certified, should be sent, at my expense, in any name you choose, to the same asylum," said Marion, watching closely the changing expressions on Armytage's face. "Then in a few weeks you would recover from the symptoms and be entitled to your discharge, but when the time came you would make use of your resemblance to my *fiancé* and change places with him."

"Remaining in the asylum while he went free? That is rather a tall order."

"Two thousand pounds is rather tall pay," retorted Marion smartly.

Armytage pondered long and deeply. He did not like to refuse the offer, but there were elements in it which jarred and galled him. "Should I be expected to remain long in the asylum?" he hazarded at length.

"Certainly not. In a reasonable time, say a month, you would recover again and, of course, would be let out," replied Marion with an air of finality.

It was on the tip of Armytage's tongue to inquire why, if the gentleman in question was not really mad, he had ever been shut up—or, at any rate, why he had not been released. Yet he felt that that would be cruel, and he could not bring himself to be cruel to Marion Fermor. But the probability that the man was indeed mad caused him still to hesitate. How could he, at this sweet girl's bidding, be a party to letting loose a lunatic, and so connive at a marriage which could only end in her misery? Homeless vagabond as he

was, with starvation staring him in the face, he could not bring himself to further such an outrage.

It was as if Marion read his thoughts, for it was she who solved his difficulty. "Am I right in believing that you are only deterred from assenting by conscientious scruples—creditable, gentlemanly scruples—on my account?" she said gently, and regarding him with more personal interest than she had yet shown.

"I confess that something of the sort occurred to me," Armytage replied, flushing painfully. "I am in great need of money—your offer would give me a fresh start—but, well, one can be hard up and yet not do things against one's better judgment to the prejudice of a lady."

Marion looked at him with increasing favour. "I knew that you were a gentleman," she said warmly. "I owe it to you to save your conscience, and I am so confident that I will do it in this way. If, in your honest opinion, after you have consorted with him in the asylum, Nigel Lukyn—that is his name—is really out of his mind you can consider the bargain off, and come out yourself instead of changing places with him."

"I agree to that," responded Armytage crisply.

Marion rose with scarcely suppressed triumph. "I am so glad, and so much indebted to you," she cried. "Here is my card, and a fifty-pound note—just to tide you over, don't you know, till you go to the asylum. You really mustn't refuse it or I shall think you don't mean business. And, let me see, where's a nice quiet place where we

can settle details without being observed. Lunch with me and—and a friend at Rule's to-morrow, will you?"

"A young lady who knows her way about," was Armytage's mental comment. But aloud he said, with a faint smile: "The friend will be Mr. Quayne, I presume?"

It was the girl's turn to look shamefaced now. "Yes, he is so clever, he will arrange everything," she admitted hastily. "By the way," she added, rather to cover her confusion than because she really cared, "I don't know your name."

"I have not a card," was the somewhat stiff reply, "but I am Leslie Armytage, late of the 29th Hussars. Mr. Quayne is at liberty to make full inquiries as to character."

And when he had bowed himself out, and Marion had made Badger happy with his meed of praise, she also descended to the street, and hailed a hansom.

"Yes, it is the genuine article, found at last," she sighed, as she threw herself back in the seat. "The only trouble is that he may prove a little too genuine."

CHAPTER III.

THE SHOT FROM THE SHRUBBERY.

MARION's arrangements for the substitution of Leslie Armytage for Nigel Lukyn progressed without a hitch, and a fortnight after her discovery of the substitute she found herself in the train *en route* for Weybridge, where a furnished house had been taken for the furtherance of her design.

Quayne and Armytage were now at Pinecroft, as the house was called, awaiting the close of the final scene, which was to be enacted that night in the removal of "the patient" to Doctor Beaman's private establishment for the insane on Putney Heath. No expense or trouble had been spared to make Armytage's commitment to the asylum so natural as to deceive the proprietor and his assistants. Armytage had taken up his residence at Weybridge in the assumed name of Arthur Clarke, while Quayne for the time being called himself Mr. Vincent Smith, and posed as the younger man's uncle.

Marion had heard that morning that all the preliminaries had been satisfactorily settled.

Armytage had duly feigned insanity, and had been certified by two medical men and a magistrate as unfit to be at large. Doctor Beaman had consented to receive him, at the instance of "his uncle," and was going to send his carriage and a couple of keepers to remove him to Putney at seven o'clock that evening. The object of Marion's journey was to give Armytage final messages for Nigel Lukyn—where he was to go, and what he was to do when, a few weeks later, he found himself free.

Yet, as the girl sat in the corner of her reserved compartment and gazed at the flying landscape, she was conscious of a diminished ardour for the scheme that had filled her life for the past few months. Now that she was on the high road to carrying her plan to a successful issue she began to analyse her motives, and she was rather startled by some of the answers she gave to her self-put questions.

"Was I—am I so much in love with Nigel as to account for my entering on this hare-brained venture?" she murmured, continuing after a pause: "I hardly think so; I had seen so little of him, and, though of course he wasn't mad, he was quite odd and rude to me sometimes."

"I am afraid it was pique and wounded pride," she mused presently. "Pique that people were laughing at me because the man I had accepted was shut up in an asylum so soon after our engagement." Though somewhat late in the day Marion had, it is to be feared, hit upon the true solution of her own extraordinary conduct. Accustomed to

THE SHOT FROM THE SHRUBBERY. 25

homage, as a great heiress, from babyhood, and later by reason of her wondrous beauty, she had resented old Lady Lukyn's action in placing her son under restraint as a slur upon her judgment, if not upon herself. Without knowing many of the details of a certain grim evening at Lukyn Hall, really spared to her in genuine pity, she had taken the grievance to herself and hugged it closely. Nigel Lukyn had been put away by his mother, she assured herself, because he had been mad enough to want to marry her—Marion Fermor, the inheritress of Martin Fermor's City-made millions.

Headstrong and impulsive, her own mistress, and with unlimited money at her disposal, she had decided that if Lady Lukyn, impoverished and sixty-five years old, could shut her son up, she Marion, three-and-twenty, and rich beyond the dreams of avarice, could set Nigel Lukyn free again. It was true that the engagement had been almost as great a surprise to herself as to others—one of those sudden lapses from the ordinary that govern the lives of many without their knowing it—just the propinquity of a pleasant country house, a couple of morning rides, and half a dozen dances sat out in a dimly-lighted conservatory with a good-looking young man who had been much abroad and knew how to make himself interesting.

So when only a week later the news came, in a delicately-worded letter from Nigel's mother, that he was an inmate of Doctor Beaman's establishment at Putney, Marion had kicked against

the pricks and had rushed off to John Quayne's office, full of her plan for upsetting Lady Lukyns' arrangements and getting Nigel out again. The detective had attempted to dissuade her, but at length, seeing that she was determined to go on and might fall into less reliable hands, he had undertaken to place his window at her disposal and to superintend Nigel Lukyn's "double" when she should have found one.

"Yes, I am afraid that it was pique rather than love that started me on this course," she sighed as the train ran into Weybridge Station. "It is too late to draw back now without looking a perfect fool, but—but I have somehow come to wonder lately if I really wish to be married to Nigel at all."

From the next first-class compartment to that in which Marion had travelled there descended a short, dark-skinned, alert man of about five-and-thirty, who, in closing the door and raising his hat to a lady seated in the compartment he had quitted, inadvertently jostled Marion. Throwing a furtive glance at her, he muttered a hurried apology in a strong American accent from under a black moustache, and disappeared in the crowd of departing passengers.

"What fierce eyes!" was Marion's transient tribute to a personality that she did not expect to encounter again.

She chartered a fly at the station gates, and was soon set down at the door of Pinecroft—a modern villa with a lawn and shrubbery and circular carriage-sweep facing the road. She had

THE SHOT FROM THE SHRUBBERY. 27

dismissed the fly and rung the house-bell, when Quayne and Armytage came across the lawn towards her from the garden chairs where they had been sitting under the trees. The ex-hussar, in the new clothes that had been obtained for him to play his part, cut a different figure from the homeless wanderer of the Strand.

During the fortnight that had intervened Marion had had several interviews with him on the business in hand, sometimes in Quayne's presence and sometimes alone. They had lunched together in restaurants, and once, at her invitation, he had visited her at her flat. Regarding him at first merely as a paid instrument, she had unconsciously drifted into making comparisons between him and the man he was to personate, and gradually she had begun to feel interested in him for his own sake. The comparisons were not always in favour of Lukyn; for similar as the two were in appearance there was a modest chivalry in Armytage's demeanour towards her which had been lacking in Lukyn.

Once, in a moment of maidenly introspection, she had admitted to herself that if in happier circumstances she had seen Leslie Armytage first, Nigel Lukyn's masterful pleading in the dimly-lit conservatory might have met with a different answer.

And now as the tall, well-knit young man advanced to meet her, in sharp contrast with the spare figure and sloping shoulders of the celebrated detective at his side, the girl felt a pang of shame at having asked such a man to undertake such a

task, and of regret that he should be so placed as to consent to undertake it. He looked more fit to lead a cavalry charge than to masquerade as a lunatic for hire.

Marion laughed a little nervously as she addressed the two men whom her money had brought to do her bidding.

"You look the parts thoroughly, both of you," she said, and corrected herself hastily with: "I don't mean, of course, that you look mad, Mr. Armytage, but that you look ready to be—at a moment's notice. And you, Mr. Quayne, are the anxious uncle to the life. I ran down to have a few words with Mr. Armytage about—about what he is to say to Mr. Lukyn. I must go back by the next train."

"You wish me to be present?" asked Quayne shortly.

"I don't think that it's necessary," Marion answered, still with that nervous laugh. "You see what I have to say to Mr. Armytage relates to the time when you will have done with me, Mr. Quayne. When Mr. Armytage will have done with me, too. Suppose we sit under those trees to have our little talk?" she added, turning to Leslie.

Quayne bowed and retired into the house. In the interests of his client he had satisfied himself that Armytage was playing fair, and he was not sorry that his own part in an exceedingly lucrative, but not altogether pleasing, case was drawing to a close. The "servants" in the house, male and female, were all careful selections from his

THE SHOT FROM THE SHRUBBERY. 29

highly-trained staff of assistants, so that there was no need for any deception till Doctor Beaman's carriage arrived at seven o'clock. It was now but half-past five.

Marion took one of the garden chairs and motioned Armytage to sit beside her.

"Mr. Quayne thinks that it will be all right if you pretend to be cured in about a month from now," she began. "Allowing time for the necessary formalities, the time for your release should come well inside two months."

"For Mr. Nigel Lukyn's release," Armytage corrected her gravely.

"Of course I meant that," said Marion, with a trace of annoyance in her tone. "I want you, please, to tell Mr. Lukyn to go down to Broadstairs as soon as he is free, and wire me to that effect. It is a quiet place, where I am not likely to be recognised, and I will run down and—arrange for our marriage to take place as soon as possible. I am too well known in London for it to be managed there without coming to Lady Lukyn's ears."

"He shall have your message, Miss Fermor," Armytage replied with an effort. Pauper as he was, the two thousand pounds had gone clean out of his mind at that moment. He was thinking that he would give the world, if he had it, to stand in the shoes of the man at whose liberation he was conniving.

"He had better not sign the telegram," Marion continued, "or if he signs it he had better sign it in your name—to keep up the deception to the last."

"I will remember that," came Armytage's reply, his firm voice yielding no sign that every fibre of him was on the rack—that he was suffering mental tortures because the sweet girl at his side was not for him, but for that other who might be a paragon of all the virtues, yet was in the eye of the law a lunatic.

Marion did not speak again immediately, but made a pattern of holes in the turf with the point of her pretty sunshade. "That is all about Mr. Lukyn," she said after this thoughtful pause. "But now—you have been so kind to me, Mr. Armytage, and are doing such a horrid thing for me—I should like to know about you afterwards—after you leave the asylum yourself. I shall be married then, of course, but—but Nigel will owe you such a debt of gratitude, that we mustn't lose sight of you."

Was there a break in the gentle voice? Armytage was wondering, as he tried to steady himself for a conventional reply. He had no opportunity for a decision, and was nearly debarred from all future decisions by a bullet that chipped the top of his ear and went humming into a bed of geraniums and lobelia on the lawn.

As he leaped to his feet, stung by the sudden pain, the crack of a pistol sounded, crisp and clear, from the shrubbery between them and the road.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW PATIENT.

AT the sound of the shot, almost before Marion and Armytage realised what had happened, Quayne came running from the house. A glance told him that neither was seriously hurt, and he dashed past them into the shrubbery, to return, however, in less than a minute empty-handed. Armytage was staunching the blood from his grazed ear and trying to reassure Marion, who at first was greatly alarmed.

"The fellow was out of sight by the time I climbed to the top of the wall," said the detective. "He may have run down any one of three side roads that are close handy, and to have gone in pursuit would have been mere waste of time. I can get him later on—if he is wanted."

The last words were spoken significantly.

"I see what you mean, and so far as I am concerned he *isn't* wanted," said Armytage promptly. "To catch him would entail police-court proceedings which would render all our preparations here futile. The fellow must have been a schoolboy after cats,

for there is no one who would take the trouble to shoot me of malice aforethought. I am not worth the powder, not to mention the shot."

"And I couldn't have been the intended target," said Marion, recovering her equanimity. "My next of kin and sole heiress at present is my only surviving relative, Aunt Jane. I am sure that the dear old thing doesn't want me dead."

"Well, it wasn't a schoolboy, and it wasn't a lady," said Quayne quietly.

"You saw him?" exclaimed both his hearers.

"I happened to be looking out of the dining-room window, and I got a glimpse of him as he was aiming from the top of the boundary wall," Quayne replied. "He caught my eye, and that probably disconcerted him. His description would fit a hundred men of the stockbroker or City type, so I will not weary you with it. But I should know him again."

Marion Fermor made a wry face and glanced at Armytage. "What shall we do—compound the felony, or give Mr. Quayne the word to track down our mysterious assailant?" she asked. And her eyes were graver than her tone as she added: "It will be a quite legitimate opportunity for you to back out of your undertaking, if you wish."

"Thank you, Miss Fermor, I have no desire to go from my contract," the young man replied, grown very stately all at once.

"Then we will let bygones be bygones with the unknown marksman," Marion rattled on, to hide her discomfiture at Armytage's manner. "I only hope he won't go and give himself up, for

if so we shall have newspapers and people preaching at us about our duty to society."

The two men smiled grimly. The beautiful heiress would hear enough on that count when it leaked out, as sooner or later it was bound to do, that she had schemed to release her lover from a lunatic asylum. But there this matter was to end—by treating the shot from the shrubbery as an idle prank not worth investigation, instead of allowing it to hamper their main project.

A fly was sent for to convey Marion back to the station, and when she had taken her seat she put out her hand and said: "Good-bye, Mr. Armytage. Do not forget what I was telling you when that unpleasant diversion occurred—that we must not lose sight of you when this is over."

"I am not likely to forget," replied Armytage gravely, as he closed the carriage door and raised his hat.

He and Quayne watched the vehicle drive away, and then the detective laid a hand on his arm and said: "You are a straight man, I believe, Mr. Armytage, after our close association of a fortnight. I shall take your word if you repeat your assurance that you know of no secret enemy—that you did not, very pardonably, deny it to Miss Fermor in order to allay her alarm."

"Honour bright," laughed Armytage. "Without vanity, I think I was fairly popular before I went under, and I certainly made no enemies in my poverty."

"Thank you," replied Quayne. "Then I shall know what to do."

"Why surely you don't attach importance to the thing? You don't think that Miss Fermor was shot at?"

Quayne shook his head. "Not so bad as that," he said, then laughed quietly as he read the puzzled anxiety in the ex-hussar's honest grey eyes, and added: "Why, my boy Badger would give you points and a beating at the art of deduction. If I am not grievously mistaken that shot was meant for your double—for Mr. Nigel Lukyn. At least that is my opinion, though I have no knowledge of the man who fired it, except that he didn't strike me as the sort to miss his quarry twice. I shall get one of my best assistants to trace him out from my description, for by the time you have loosed Mr. Lukyn he may have improved in his shooting."

Armytage made no reply, but Quayne's theory, so obvious now that it was pointed out, increased his distaste for the task he had undertaken. It was bad enough to be pledged to supply the girl he loved with a husband from a lunatic asylum, but when that husband, in addition to his alleged mental ailments, had a ruthless assassin on his track, the question occurred whether he would proceed at all.

On the whole he decided that he would go on for the present, because it would be open to him, after seeing Lukyn in the asylum, to draw back if he could gather from his double that he had reason to fear death at the hands of an enemy.

"Perhaps Lukyn got himself put away in order to escape something of the kind," he remarked

to Quayne as they went into the house to eat an early dinner before Doctor Beaman's people arrived.

"You are coming on, stimulated by my comparison of you with Badger," said the detective drily.

"If I find that Lukyn is a sane man, but haunted with the terror of assassination, what shall I do?" asked Armytage.

John Quayne reflected for fully a minute. "In that case," he said at length, "Lukyn would almost certainly refuse to avail himself of your assistance. There would be no need for it. Not being mad, he could as readily recover from his feigned insanity as yourself if it suited him to do so. In fact, his refusal to come out will be a clear proof that the gentleman who was in the shrubbery just now is a terror to him. Your course in these circumstances would be to inform him of what happened to you, and get from him the reasons for his fear. Then, if he and Miss Fermor wish it, I can take the matter up seriously and put an end to his danger."

"Very well," Armytage replied. "We will leave it at that."

The new element introduced by the episode of the afternoon increased his eagerness to see the man who had presumably won Marion Fermor's heart, yet was now open to the suspicion of gross cowardice in hiding in a lunatic asylum rather than take his risks in the open.

"By George, I'd be the Czar himself, with forty thousand Nihilists laying in wait for me, if I had

Marion Fermor's love. I shouldn't want to run away from it for a little danger, as this chap seems to have done. Mr. Nigel Lukyn must be a cur," was his mental comment on the situation now presented.

So presently, when Doctor Beaman's imposing barouche rolled into the drive and Quayne's ably-drilled underlings went to the door to receive the Doctor's deputies, Armytage was more than ready to play his well-rehearsed part. It had been arranged that he was not to be violent—only a trifle melancholy, and staunch for the present to the delusion that he was entitled to ten millions under the will of the late Queen Victoria.

Quayne's foresight had provided that the "patient" should be got away without any delay, so as to give the practised keepers from the asylum no time to discern anything out of the ordinary. With the right amount of feeling, "Mr. Vincent Smith" handed over his dear nephew "Arthur Clark" to the two men who were waiting in the hall, but his little set speech was cut short by a dual exclamation.

"What is the matter?" asked Quayne sharply.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the senior attendant.

"You'd be as surprised as us if you'd seen a gentleman who's at our place now. Mr. Clark is as like him as two peas in a pod."

"Ah, indeed," remarked Quayne with careless affability. "Well, you must be sure you don't get them mixed."

And an hour later, when Armytage was ushered into the presence of his new custodian, there was

fresh confirmation of Marion's accurate selection of an instrument for her purpose.

"What's this, Parker?" cried the doctor, rising from an easy chair in his cosy sanctum. "I gave orders that he was to be kept in the refractory ward till he quieted down. Perhaps he's better, though?"

"This isn't Mr. Lukyn, sir," the attendant replied. "It is Mr. Clark, whom we've fetched from Weybridge." And going nearer to his principal, Parker added under his breath: "A very nice gentleman, sir—quiet as a lamb, and quite different from the other."

"God bless my soul!" muttered the doctor, wiping his gold 'pince-nez and readjusting them, "what an extraordinary resemblance."

And rising he welcomed Armytage with the cordial professional courtesy due to an inmate likely to redound to his credit by a speedy cure at a minimum of trouble.

But when Armytage retired to rest that night in the comfortable private room allotted to him his reflections took a sombre hue.

"Refractory ward till he's quieted down," he said to himself. "That doesn't sound as if Mr. Nigel Lukyn would be a fit subject for my overtures—or a fit mate for that sweet girl, if I get him out of this. Unless, by the way, he's shamming very hard indeed."

CHAPTER V.

MAD OR SANE ?

LESLIE ARMYTAGE passed a week as an inmate of Grey Gables without having an opportunity of seeing his double. From stray allusions which he overheard among the staff he gathered that Lukyn was still under rigorous restraint, and that it was not deemed safe for him to mingle freely with the patients whose milder maladies entitled them to the run of the extensive grounds.

In the meanwhile the voluntary prisoner himself was treated with the consideration for which Doctor Beaman's establishment was celebrated. To all intents and purposes, except that he could not leave the premises, he might have been an honoured guest staying at a first-class hotel. He had no laboured part to play, since he was supposed to be sane enough save for his one delusion about Queen Victoria's will, and an occasional reference to that subject, when in conversation with the doctor or his assistants, was all that was required.

He did not fail to notice with a certain grim amusement the nods and winks that his appearance caused among keepers, nurses, and patients alike, in the first days after his admission. His resemblance to the occupant of the refractory ward must be very marked, he told himself, and on the third day he had an experience that led him to suppose that it was without a flaw.

A nice old lady, suffering from the belief that she was a cucumber, who had been ill in bed on his arrival and had not had the strange likeness explained to her, was sunning herself in the garden in charge of a nurse. Armytage was strolling near the seat where she was sitting, when the old lady, on catching sight of him, uttered a piercing scream and rushed towards the house, followed by the nurse.

Armytage looked after them, puzzled ; but was interrupted by a laugh at his elbow. A male patient, nearly convalescent, had been walking behind him.

"She thinks that you're Lukyn," this gentleman explained. "Lukyn is—well, to put it mildly, not so nice as the rest of us."

"Indeed !" answered Armytage. "I have heard that I am like a man of that name, but I have not yet had an opportunity of judging of the resemblance."

"You couldn't have," said the affable convalescent. "Lukyn is in what the shilling shockers call 'durance vile.' He fairly ran amuck last week and chased that poor old girl up and down the corridors till he was overpowered. Beaman

very properly had him put in the padded room, and he's there still."

After this Armytage was more anxious than ever to see Lukyn and form his own opinion whether he was feigning madness or really a dangerous lunatic. In either case his own position was rendered more than ever distasteful by the state of things he found at the asylum. If Lukyn was as bad as he was described, he certainly ought not to be at liberty—much less ought he to marry Marion Fermor or anyone else. On the other hand, if he was feigning insanity so vigorously as to demand physical restraint, there must be some terrorising influence at work, which presaged ill for Marion's happiness if she linked her fate with his.

But the deferred meeting between the two "doubles" took place at last. One morning after breakfast Doctor Beaman, who was noted for his expedients in soothing troublesome inmates, came up with a little air of mystery to Armytage as the latter was lounging in the reading-room.

"I believe that you can do me a service, Mr. Clark," the doctor began. "You have heard that we have a gentleman here so exactly resembling you as to give rise to universal remark. He is still inclined to be violent, poor fellow, but it occurred to me that if he could see you it would interest and possibly amuse him. If I can once get him into that state—make him thoughtful, in fact—I have great hopes that the present series of paroxysms may pass."

Armytage, only too glad of the chance, agreed

with alacrity, and accompanied the principal and several stalwart keepers to the refractory ward. All precautions against a sudden rush on the part of the inmate having been taken, the door was opened and Armytage, closely guarded, stood in the entrance. Though he knew what to expect he could not repress a start at the resemblance between himself and the man whose fiercely questioning gaze met his milder scrutiny. They might, as the attendant had said, have been two peas in a pod.

Nigel Lukyn, tired out with raging up and down the narrow limits of his cage, had flung himself for the moment on the padded bench opposite the door. Glaring at Armytage, he rose slowly, making queer little noises through his clenched teeth, and advanced towards the door. There being that in his attitude which suggested a sudden spring, Doctor Beaman was about to give the order to shut and bolt the door, when Lukyn stopped and began to laugh immoderately.

"Well, if this isn't funny," he roared in a voice which Armytage could have sworn was his own. "Come in here, old man, and stay with me. We must be the heavenly twins." And he laughed and laughed again.

"That'll do," said the doctor. "Close the door, Parker, and after we have gone go in and tell him about the gentleman who's so like him. He is interested, and will soon come round. I am deeply indebted to you, Mr. Clark, for helping me out of the difficulty. By the way," he added, bending a keen glance on the well-behaved patient as they

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returned along the corridor, "how goes it with her late Majesty's will?"

"I am still in hopes of getting my own. I intend to appeal to the House of Lords," replied Armytage gravely.

Doctor Beaman nodded cheerily, and, slipping into his private room, left Armytage more puzzled than ever by what he had seen of Lukyn. Not being an expert, he could form no idea as to the man's real mental state, but there was this satisfaction about the morning's work—that if the patient showed the signs of improvement expected by the doctor there would be little doubt that he was genuinely deranged. For, if he was shamming, any interest he might feel in his "double" would not cause him to desist.

So it was that when, four days later, Armytage heard that Lukyn had recovered sufficiently to join the general company on the morrow, his hopes of being able to fulfil his project fell to zero. Lukyn's quieter mood was presumptive evidence that he had been influenced and interested by the doctor's shrewd experiment, and his mind was, therefore, in an unsound condition. Yet, though Armytage deplored the disappointment which failure would bring to Marion Fermor, his heart thrilled with joy that she would be freed from the prospect of such an unpromising match. To himself, from the sordid pecuniary point of view, failure would make no difference, for Marion had generously agreed to pay for the attempt—not by results.

The thought then occurred: had he the right

to withhold his help because Lukyn was probably a good deal madder than Marion had believed? It was true that Quayne had made no secret of his doubt of Lukyn's sanity, yet he had lent his invaluable aid to assisting the escape. But then the detective had heard nothing of violence and padded rooms, and it was doubtful if he would have undertaken the case had he known what was going on at the asylum. On the whole, Armytage felt that it would be premature to shape his future course till he had talked with Lukyn privately.

The limited restrictions placed on patients at Grey Gables enabled him to contrive this momentous interview on the very day of Lukyn's release from close confinement. Though probably subject to invisible vigilance from afar, Marion's *fiancé* was wandering in a shady path in the grounds, when Armytage, who had shadowed him thither, met him face to face. The ex-hussar smiled and proffered a cigarette. For a moment the issue hung in the balance. Lukyn stared at him in genuine surprise, then broke into a modified form of the laughter which had convulsed him in the refractory ward.

"A curious coincidence, isn't it?" said Armytage, affecting to join in the laughter.

Lukyn took the cigarette, lit it, and winked knowingly at his double. "If it is a coincidence," he said, turning and strolling in the same direction.

Now what did the fellow mean by that, Armytage wondered. The remark suggested that he guessed

the reason why a double of himself had been introduced into the asylum. There was, in fact, almost a direct invitation to disclosure in the curious words, but caution demanded that Armytage should not divulge his mission till he was quite certain that it ought to be carried out. Besides, he wanted to assure himself first that his services would be accepted, which would not be the case if Lukyn was using the asylum as a refuge from miscreants eager to slay him. To clear up this point Armytage essayed quite a subtle stroke for him.

"What else could it be but a coincidence, unless I had followed you here with some sinister design?" he said, with a significance which could not fail to call up an answering sign if Lukyn was indeed a frightened man, hiding for his life.

But it called up nothing of the kind—only a shrug and the careless rejoinder: "They'll clap you in the padded cell if you talk like that. I'm not afraid of any sinister designs."

Stealing a glance at the speaker, Armytage was convinced of the sincerity of the answer. In the firmly-moulded jaw, so like his own, in the steel-grey eyes, there was no quiver of fear. So he shot another bow at a venture.

"Of course, there is the alternative—that I might have been selected as an inmate because of my resemblance to you, not from a sinister but from a benevolent design," he hazarded.

Nigel Lukyn came to an abrupt halt in the woodland walk and faced him. A cunning leer creased the handsome face of the late tenant of the re-

fractory ward. "That is another matter," he said. "I like benevolence—directed towards myself."

Armytage felt that he was getting on swimmingly, so far as the task entrusted to him went. Whatever he might be, Lukyn was not a fugitive coward, and therefore it behoved him, according to his contract, to effect his escape. After all, the episode which had led to his being placed in the refractory ward might have been a last expiring flicker of insanity, which Doctor Beaman's judicious treatment would stamp out during the next few weeks. Lukyn seemed sane enough now, and anyhow it was time to moot his credentials.

Putting on an air of mystery, Armytage said suddenly: "I think you know a Miss Marion Fermor?"

They were standing by one of the numerous seats which the thoughtful doctor sprinkled about his grounds for the use of his patients. Lukyn seized Armytage by the arm and pulled him down into it.

"Shall I tell you what I'm going to do with Marion Fermor when I get out of this?" he whispered. "I am going to make it so hot for her that she will wish that she had never been born."

And for the next twenty minutes Lukyn poured into Armytage's ear the horrors of physical and mental torture, ending in a death of unspeakable terror, which he had in store for the girl who had sat for three months at a detective's window in order to find a human instrument to set him free.

With an effort Armytage restrained himself

during the terrible discourse, and rose from it convinced that Mr. Nigel Lukyn was not only a lunatic, but a dangerous one—dangerous before all others to Marion Fermor, and likely to be doubly dangerous to her when he could so far control his periodical fits of violence as to give play to a very natural aptitude for cruelty and cunning.

"A maniac with the blood-lust of a man-eating tiger," was Armytage's mental comment, as he walked in perplexity back to the house.

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CHAPTER VI.

A COUNCIL OF THREE.

IN the sitting-room of a handsome private suite at the Hotel Colossal in Northumberland Avenue, two gentlemen were talking confidentially, yet with the air of not going fully into their subject because they were waiting for a third party to join in the discussion.

One was a loosely-jointed, large man, with a drooping fair moustache and faded blue eyes, whom his companion addressed as Voules. He was registered at the hotel bureau as Mr. Scorrier Voules, of Denver, U.S.A., though the superficial observer would hardly have attributed American citizenship to one who lounged with such languid apathy in his easy chair.

The other man was in sharp contrast to his roommate. Short of stature, but powerfully and compactly built, he paced to and fro, and jerked out his words with a snappy vigour that betokened irritation at the other's lazy patience. At every second turn he whipped out his watch and consulted it. According to the hotel register, this

energetic guest was Mr. Fayter Frayne, of Chicago, and as to his nationality there was no doubt whatever. The accent in which he bullied the waiters and worried the chambermaids was aggressively Transatlantic.

"She's overdue!" he fumed, tearing out his watch again. "Her train was due at Euston at 3.45. Ought to have been here five minutes back. I reckon I've never yearned for anything like I do for the yarn that gal has got to tell us."

"I shouldn't agitate myself," said the lazy man in the chair.

"Yes, but I shot to kill, and it ain't like me to miss a mark at fifteen paces," retorted Frayne hotly. "It would be the same with you, you cold-blooded fish, if you had bungled your specialité. I'm mortal keen to know if I missed the wrong man or the right one. If Berthe has made no error I shall rejoice, for I want no innocent blood on my soul. But if she's been too clever I shall grant myself no pardon for losing such a chance because that cuss looked out of window as I drew trigger."

"Well, you'll soon be out of your misery, for here comes our valued colleague," said Voules as the door was opened by a bell-boy, who announced:—"Miss Berthe Roumier."

The young lady who entered was a vivacious brunette, with an elegant figure and a graceful carriage that compensated for lack of stature. Her dark eyes flashed triumphantly—especially upon the anxious Mr. Frayne.

"I read the riddle aright!" she exclaimed, as

soon as the bell-boy had departed. "Lukyn has never left the asylum since he was sent there four months ago."

"By thunder, but that's a load off my chest!" cried Frayne.

Scorrier Voules chuckled and reared his lank form from the chair to shake hands with Miss Roumier. "Tell us all about it, little woman," he said, subsiding again. "Fayter is dying to know how he found us over on a wild-goose chase and so nearly at the wrong man."

The girl was by way of being very much at home with these two, for she sat down opposite Voules and lighted a cigarette, which she took from a silver case.

"This is refreshing, after being a French nun for three days," she said, leaning back and smoking luxuriously. "Well, my friends and brothers, the story is a very brief one. To confirm my surmise I went down to Lukyn Hall in Northamptonshire, and by the aid of my ecclesiastical garb gained access to the mother of the man in whom we are so deeply interested. It is not, as we had supposed, an old family. Lady Lukyn is the widow of a City alderman, who named his amazingly hideous modern residence after himself and then died, leaving his widow and son short of cash. That is how I got in touch. I let on that I wanted to know if she'd sell the place to a parcel of French nuns bundled out of France under the new edict."

"Smart!" ejaculated Voules under his breath.

"She was a nice old lady, and responsive to sympathy," the girl went on, unheeding the

interruption. "She didn't want to sell, but was keen to talk about her reasons for wanting to stick to her ugly barrack. She desires to leave it to her son who, she informed me, has developed what she hopes is quite a temporary mania, and is at present an inmate of Doctor Beaman's private asylum at Putney. That much, of course, we know already, but I squeezed the old woman like a lemon. There isn't the shadow of a doubt that our man, Nigel Lukyn, has not been outside Grey Gables for a single hour since he went in, and therefore couldn't have been the man Fayter saw in the Strand and later traced to Weybridge—to miss him so cleverly."

"It's a relief that I did miss him, as he was the wrong one," said the fierce little man with the heavy black moustache. "As you have done such a lot, Berthe, perhaps you can set me in a line with the right one."

Miss Roumier rather pointedly disregarded the outburst and glanced irritably at the sprawling Voules, who rose and propped himself against the mantelpiece. It was as if the tall man grudgingly obeyed the command of a superior officer.

"That's better," said the girl. "Try and look a little interested and intelligent."

"The lady in the garden at Weybridge was undoubtedly Miss Fermor, Lukyn's *fiancée*," said Voules. "It is, at least, to my credit that I ascertained that. Everything, in my judgment, seems to hinge upon her."

"And our subsequent inquiries show that the fellow who resembles Lukyn was taken to Grey

Gables the same night," added Berthe. "Backed by my discovery that Lukyn has never been out of the asylum since he was first admitted, I think that I can claim that my theory was fully justified. Our initial error was due to a deep-laid scheme on the part of Miss Fermor to devise her lover's escape by providing a duplicate."

"What a naughty girl she must be," drawled Voules, gazing at his vacated chair as though he was longing to sit down again. "I presume you mean that she has juggled a man resembling Lukyn into the asylum, who in due course is intended to juggle Lukyn out."

"I am glad that your mind is so active to-day," Miss Roumier rallied him. "Yes, that is what I mean, and our course is clear. We must watch Miss Fermor night and day, so as to be ready for any move she may make. It will be a surer method than shadowing the asylum. Then, when she has pulled off her little *coup*, I shall be able to unleash you two upon our quarry with no chance of another flash in the pan."

Mr. Fayter Frayne paused in his restless promenade to put the question:—"You have not placed Vincent Smith, I guess—the galoot who spoilt my aim by squinting along my gun-barrel?"

"I have not, but I have not given up hopes," Berthe replied decidedly. "I confess that that man causes me uneasiness, for I suspect him of being the chief engineer of this clever young lady's plot. He has covered up his traces completely, and those of all his servants as well. I expect, however, to be able to locate him shortly, when

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I have carried out a project which I have in view."

"Is it permitted to dense male creatures to be enlightened as to that project?" Voules made languid inquiry.

"I intend to take a small flat in the Grandison Mansions, where Miss Fermor resides," Berthe replied. "This so-called 'Vincent Smith' is sure to be in close touch with her, and I shall have lost my skill if I fail to put my finger on him before it is time for us to act. I shall also be able to launch you executives the moment this bright Marion starts out to meet Nigel Lukyn, for I cannot think that she will give him sanctuary at her flat till after marriage."

"I shan't miss him the next time you put me within range," snapped the fiery Frayne, his heavy black moustache bristling.

Berthe Roumier sneered at him openly. "I am beginning to think that fire-arms are clumsy weapons," she said, rising and flinging her cigarette stump into the empty grate. "I shall try and work it so as to let Scorrier Voules go through his parlour tricks next time. A lazy man is sometimes more effective than a firebrand, but there's not a whole street of folly between the pair of you. The Chief might have sent me brainier colleagues."

She glanced in the mirror over the mantelpiece, tucked in a stray curl and walked to the door, where she turned and faced them, her hand on the knob. Her caustic manner had fled away; her expressive Gallic face was all tearful entreaty.

"You mustn't mind me; I have got such a lot

to do and think of," she cooed pleadingly. "No one knows better than Berthe Roumier how staunch you are to the cause we have at heart—how deadly you will prove, each in your own line, against the treacherous hound we were sent to kill. You must bear with me, my brothers, if my tongue runs away with me sometimes."

With which she turned and was gone.

"Little spit-fire, but true as steel, and worth the two of us," Fayter Frayne growled with reluctant admiration.

"The two of us!" Voules echoed scornfully, with unwonted energy. "There are twenty thousand men in our organisation, and she's worth the lot. Boss Mulliner knew what he was about when he delegated that dainty feminine morsel to lead us."

CHAPTER VII.

BADGER IN A NEW PHASE.

MARION FERMOR's flat in the great "mansions" which she favoured was one of the most modest homes in London, appraised in comparison with the wealth of the owner. Till the fateful day when she met and plighted herself to Nigel Lukyn, she had laughed all suitors out of court, vowing that the ideal existence was that of the "bachelor girl" with plenty of money. To that existence a suite of rooms in a big caravanserai had seemed more adaptable than a separate house in Park Lane, with its troops of exacting servants and its equally exacting social duties.

When she desired a quiet spell she had her riverside cottage at Maidenhead or her 800-ton steam yacht at Cowes to repair to; but the greater part of the year found her at the comfortable flat, where three maids and a page sufficed to wait upon her, where that least dragon-like of chaperons, Aunt Jane, played propriety, and where she was in touch with the innocent delights of the great city.

Her rooms were on the first floor, and consisted

of three reception rooms, four bedrooms, and the necessary servants' quarters, all approached through a small entrance-hall. The accommodation was that of a country shooting-box, but it cost £500 a year. As the prospectus of the Grandison Mansions pointed out, it was the address that was worth the money, though that had not been the bait that had caught Marion Fermor. Her necessity was an adequate *pied à terre* within the shilling radius, and she got it at the Mansions with several other advantages thrown in.

Among the latter was the boon, from the point of view of the bachelor girl, of being able to come and go at all hours without exciting remark. There were no neighbours to peer and pry when late cabs drove up. The other dwellers in the great building were self-centred and minded their own affairs, which, so far as outward appearances went, wore a strong family resemblance. The residents of Grandison Mansions all seemed to be engaged in extracting from life its full modicum of pleasure.

One night, three weeks after Leslie Armytage's departure for the asylum, Marion alighted from a hansom at the big outer door of the Mansions at a little before midnight. She had been to a theatre, and afterwards had looked in for a quarter of an hour at a women's club in Regent Street.

As she passed into the great hall a lady who had preceded her through the swing doors was crossing towards the elevator opposite, where the uniformed boy in charge stood in readiness. Marion quickened her pace, hoping to ascend at the same time, but to her annoyance the boy started before

she could reach the lift. She turned and vented her anger on the hall-porter, who had watched the occurrence from his glass cage.

"It's a new boy, miss," said the man apologetically. "Only came on this afternoon, and ain't got used to his duties yet. I'll give him a bit of a dressing-down, though I expect he'll be all right in a day or two. Seems sharp enough, the imperent young imp."

Marion, mollified, begged the porter not to be hard on the culprit. Then, to pass the time till the elevator descended rather than from curiosity, she inquired who was the lady who had gone up.

"I thought I knew all the residents by sight," she added, "but this one, if she belongs to the Mansions, was strange to me. Though it is true I only saw her back."

"She is new, too, miss—came in two days ago only, to one of the smaller flats on the floor above yours. Mrs. Molyneux, the name is," replied the porter.

The elevator shot into view, and Marion, nodding good-night to her informant, crossed the hall and entered the softly-cushioned cage. For the moment, the boy, busy with the mechanism, had his back to her, but as the elevator began to rise he turned and disclosed the chubby and beaming countenance of Billy Badger.

"Why, Billy!" Marion exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here? That was a nice way to treat an old friend—to leave me planted there in the hall. But perhaps you didn't see me."

Badger beamed broader still. "Yes I did. Did

it a-purpose to prevent your recognising of me afore her," he replied with an upward jerk of his arm to the unseen floors above. "Don't you make no error, miss, I haven't left Mr. Quayne, and I ain't going to. I'm here on the professional lay—doing 'tec work for him."

"How very clever of you, and how very interesting," said Marion. And then with a happy intuition she added: "As you didn't want me to recognise you, I suppose the lady you took up is the person you have got to keep those sharp grey eyes of yours on, eh, Billy?"

"Ah! that would be telling, and John Quayne's fellers don't give his business away—leastways, this one don't, even to you, miss," said Badger with an air of importance that made Marion laugh. She knew that the famous detective had an extensive practice, and she did not connect Badger's presence at Grandison Mansions in the guise of a lift-boy with her own affairs. She regarded the meeting as a pleasant coincidence, for Badger had always amused and interested her.

Though the boy had purposely driven the elevator slowly, the short journey to the first floor was already at an end, and Marion stepped out on to the landing. "Well, good-night, Billy," she said, "I don't want to pry into your secrets. But I hope that they are all well at home—Granny, and Uncle Tom, and Sister Sue?"

Badger was evidently not the Badger of old, for he had grown rude suddenly. Standing at the entrance of the cage, he hardly looked at her, his gaze slanting upwards over her shoulder. Then he

uttered something inarticulate, and with a quick jerk of his wrist swung himself and the elevator down the well—out of sight, and without reply, save a queer facial contortion.

Marion was turning away with a smile for the boy's unintelligible antics, when the sensation that human eyes were watching her drew her glance in the same direction to which Badger had looked—to the balustrade of the landing of the floor above. Leaning over and peering down at her was the lady who had forestalled her in the use of the lift. Marion recognised her by her cream satin dress and by the fleecy cloud which she wore over her dark hair. The face, too, hitherto unseen that night, seemed familiar, but it was withdrawn before Marion could connect it with any previous experience.

"Really the Mansions are becoming a veritable cave of mystery," she murmured as she tripped along the corridor to the door of her flat. Opening it with her latch-key, she passed on into the drawing-room, where a pretty pink and white old lady in a priceless lace shawl and cap was nodding sleepily over a book.

"Why, how naughty of you, Aunt Jane," cried the girl. "I had no idea you were going to break our compact by sitting up for me, or I should have come straight home from Wyndham's instead of popping into the club for a chat with Gwen Paget."

The old lady laid aside her book and suddenly became very wide awake indeed. "I had no notion myself of sitting up for you when you went out, my dear," she said, "I transgressed because

I have something to tell you before I go to bed—something that will probably make you laugh at me."

"What is it, aunty?" asked Marion, eyeing her curiously. For it was not her chaperon's way to make mountains out of molehills.

"A strange thing happened this evening," the old lady replied, shaking her head at the reminiscence. "About half an hour after you had started for the theatre, while I was indulging in an after-dinner snooze in this room and on this sofa, your maid Crispin came in and said that a Mr. Percy had called with a message for 'my niece.' As you were out, and it might be important, I told Crispin to show him in; and a lankier, lazier gawk, albeit a gentleman, I never clapped eyes on. He just sank into that arm-chair and fixed me with his faded eyes, stroking his long fair moustache.

"'I am sorry that your niece is not at home, madam,' he began, 'but if you are in her confidence there will be no harm done. I am the representative of the clever individual who is superintending her praiseworthy efforts to extract a friend from unpleasant surroundings.' And there he stopped as if he expected me to put a name to his precious individual," concluded Aunt Jane.

Marion's heart beat fast. She had not told her aunt of her dealings with Quayne, or of her scheme to substitute a "double" at the asylum in order to facilitate Nigel Lukyn's escape. Yet this stranger's visit pointed to his knowing all about her secret. She could only suppose that he was an emissary of Quayne's, though it would be

highly reprehensible of the detective to employ a person who would give her away to her relative in this fashion.

"What did you say to him?" Marion asked, striving to conceal her eagerness.

"I told him that I hadn't the slightest knowledge of what he was talking about," replied Aunt Jane.

"And the next minute it seemed that I couldn't possibly have had such knowledge, for he suddenly asked my name, and, on my telling him, exclaimed that he had come to the wrong flat. 'I beg a thousand pardons for the mistake,' he said, 'but I thought that I was in Mrs. Molyneux's rooms.' I disillusioned him, and he slouched out of the chair and took himself off with many apologies."

Marion breathed a sigh of relief. The ambiguous language used by the visitor must have referred to a totally different kettle of fish. "Well, surely there was nothing in that to make you sit up, aunty," she said.

But Aunt Jane shook her head wisely. "There wouldn't have been if that was all," she replied. "But when the man was gone I summoned Crispin and questioned her. Your maid is too well trained to make blunders, and she was positive that the man first asked for Miss Fermor by name. On being told that you were out he went so far as to pay me the compliment of knowing even my insignificant patronymic and asked for Miss Middleton. Whereby he stands convicted as a fraud—probably a thief prospecting the flat with a view to a subsequent raid on your jewellery."

"Perhaps," said Marion dreamily, for she was

mentally searching for quite other probabilities. That the self-styled Mr. Percy had called to ferret out particulars of her plot for freeing Lukyn, and, on finding that Aunt Jane could not enlighten him, had accounted for his presence by a false excuse, she was now firmly convinced. But how could her scheme have leaked out, and who could take sufficient interest in the affair to pry further into it? There was, too, the curious chance, if chance it was, that the man was aware of, and had used, the name of Mrs. Molyneux—the lady whom Badger had so adroitly prevented from learning that he was in Mr. Quayne's office.

"Well, my dear, I am going to bed now that I have unburdened my mind," said Aunt Jane, yawning. "If I were you I should inform the police to-morrow—before you lose your diamonds."

It was not to the police that Marion took her story next morning, but to John Quayne himself, who listened gravely—very gravely, she thought—to what she told him. The investigator, however, having assimilated her information, had very little to say in return. He thanked her for coming, and admitted that "Mr. Percy's" visit might betoken a hostile influence, but he professed himself unable to define the scope of such influence. He laughingly confessed to having put Badger on as elevator-boy at Grandison Mansions, but was careful to leave the boy's mission there obscure.

"All I can tell you," said Quayne, as he showed her out, "is that this person's appearance at your flat makes me more than ever anxious to test a theory that I have formed about the shot that

was fired at Mr. Armytage from the shrubbery at Pinecroft. The only person who can help me to a conclusion is Mr. Nigel Lukyn. Will you promise, Miss Fermor, to apprise me the moment you receive word that he is clear of the asylum so that I may see him without delay?"

"I will do that," replied Marion. And then as light dawned upon her she added: "You think that Mr. Lukyn has enemies—that the shot was intended for him?"

"That question naturally presents itself," Quayne assented. "Mr. Lukyn can clear the matter up in less than two words. In your interests and his I ought to interview him before he mingles with the world again."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TELEGRAM ARRIVES.

DURING the next three weeks Marion was conscious of a revulsion of feeling towards her engagement with Nigel Lukyn, which she resolutely beat down because she persuaded herself that it was born of cowardice. She told herself that she no longer wanted to marry a man who might be shot at any moment, and who would make her life one of constant dread and anxiety.

Yet throughout this little bout of casuistry there was an undercurrent of guilty feeling. Marion knew that she was not a coward, and that she was actuated by no such fears.

As the time went on towards the date when Leslie Armytage's "cure" might be expected to have culminated in his release—a release by which his substitute would benefit—the girl grew bolder in her self-communings, and asked herself whether she really loved the man for whom she had schemed, and contrived, and spent money like water. The answer came back every time in the word that she had used before, and it was not love but "pique."

She had wrought for Nigel Lukyn's release not because she loved him, but because she wanted to turn the tables on the people who had pitied her and laughed at her by turns for the disastrous sequel to her engagement. And in the heart-searchings which led to this conclusion it was impossible to avoid comparison between her *fiancé* and the modest, chivalrous ex-soldier whom she had prevailed on to personate him.

"If I could put Leslie Armytage's nature into Nigel Lukyn's body I should be well content," she sighed many times during that period of waiting.

However, there was no thought in Marion Fermor's mind of drawing back. Having plighted her troth to Nigel, and further ratified it by her effort to liberate him, it would be the height of cruelty to throw him over when he appeared. He would have heard from Armytage in the asylum of the tremendous energy she had brought to bear on the matter, and he would be justified in attributing it to the devotion of a loving heart. To destroy that illusion now would be to do violence to her own self-respect. All the womanliness in her character prompted her to go through with her programme to the end, even if that end should be bitter.

Such was her mental attitude on a late November day, nearly two months after Armytage's admission to Grey Gables. The morning had broken damp and chill, and Marion, after a run to Richmond and back on her motor-car, had lunched at her flat and was meaning to enjoy a quiet afternoon by the fire with Aunt Jane in preference to braving

the foggy atmosphere in search of the tea-tables of her friends.

She had just tucked herself into her favourite chair, with her toes on the fender, when the outer bell of the flat rang sharply, and a moment later Crispin entered with a telegram. Such missives were common in the rich girl's household, and Aunt Jane, comfortably ensconced on the other side of the fireplace, took no notice as her niece tore open the envelope. Doubtless, thought the old lady, it was from the yacht captain at Cowes, or from the housekeeper at the Maidenhead cottage.

Marion read the telegram, and confirmed Aunt Jane's surmise by the order she gave to her maid.

"Pack a small bag, Crispin, please—with enough things for one night," said the young mistress. "I must run down to Eyot Cottage. The gardener wants instructions about a new stove for the orchid house, and I can talk sense into him quicker than write it."

"Do you wish me to come too, dear?" asked Aunt Jane with a glance at the mist-wreathed window and rueful thoughts of her rheumatism.

"No, indeed, aunty; I wouldn't drag you away from the fire for worlds, and there is no need, as I shall be back to-morrow," said Marion. The good spinster's relief prevented her from noticing the tremor in her niece's voice.

"And shall you require me, miss?" purred the demure and more observant maid.

Marion affected to consider. "On the whole, I think not, Crispin," she replied. "I can get along very comfortably, and as it is your night out—I

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should be sorry to interfere with your arrangements."

"Thank you, miss," the girl murmured, and retired to pack the bag. But before seeking her mistress's bedroom to perform that duty she went out into the corridor and running upstairs to the next floor, disappeared for half a minute into Mrs. Molyneux's flat. After which she raced down again, closing the door of her mistress's flat as quietly as she had opened it on her exit.

In the meanwhile Marion was priding herself on her cleverness, for the telegram was not from Maidenhead at all. It had been handed in at the Broadstairs post-office an hour before, and ran:—

"Just arrived here. Left Putney this morning. Staying at Royal Albion Hotel.—ARMYTAGE."

For a moment the signature caused her a pang, till she remembered that she had arranged for Lukyn to sign Armytage's name to avoid suspicion. The summons had come, and Marion, having long ago decided to meet it, was prepared to do so with as much tact and vigour as though it were entirely welcome. In fact "the sport of the thing"—of having successfully carried off a patient from the great Doctor Beaman's stronghold—dominated her for the moment, and obscured the regrets that had been growing upon her over her hasty engagement. In a quarter of an hour she was ready to start, the page had been sent down to the hall with her bag, and nothing remained but to kiss Aunt Jane good-bye. The process, simple as it seemed, caused her several minutes

hesitation. She hated to deceive the old lady, and was half inclined to confide in her; but finally she decided not to do so till she had seen Nigel and fixed a day for the wedding.

Badger had been withdrawn from his post as elevator boy after only a week of service, having presumably fulfilled his mission; so that it was not that engaging youngster who piloted her down to the hall. The regular attendant, a surly, whey-faced youth who had been given a holiday during Badger's interregnum, had resumed his functions. Marion had hardly stepped from the elevator when the electric gong, summoning it to one of the upper floors, sounded sharply.

"Dret the woman," she heard the lad mutter. "What's the use of making a row like that after I've been given the office." And with a vicious jerk of the rope he spun the cage upwards out of sight.

Her own page had called a cab and put the bag on it, but Marion took out her watch and consulted it thoughtfully before getting in. She was mindful of her promise to let Quayne know directly Lukyn had left the asylum, and she would prefer to see the detective personally if there was time to drive to his chambers before going to Victoria. She little guessed what momentous issues hung upon her choice. She decided that it would be cutting it too fine, and ordered the cabman to go straight to the terminus, whence she could send a messenger boy with a pencilled note to Quayne.

Thus was a lady who descended the steps of the Mansions to a second cab immediately after

Marion's had driven off baulked of a great opportunity. For this second cab dogged its predecessor to the terminus and set down its fare at the first-class booking-office half a minute after Marion had paid her cabman and entered. This story would have been considerably curtailed—might, indeed, have been no story at all—if Marion had had time to go first to the place where Quayne spun his spider's webs in the Strand. As it was, the lady was also debarred from witnessing the despatch of the messenger-boy with a note which Marion had scribbled to Quayne in the cab. For she was accosted outside the booking-office by a tall, languid gentleman who engaged in a hurried colloquy.

"I got your 'phone message at the Colossal and came along," he said. "What is the game?"

"The bird is on the wing. You and Fayter must both stay indoors at the hotel and hold yourselves in readiness for a wire from me," was the reply. "Not another word now, for I must hear where she books for and get my own ticket."

"Incomparable Berthe!" the tall man murmured, lounging away as the trim figure disappeared into the portals of the terminus.

Marion selected a seat in a compartment already occupied by an elderly couple, and was settling down to the perusal of bookstall literature, when the guard opened the door and, with the whistle to his lips, showed in the lady to whom Badger had given precedence in the elevator at Grandison Mansions some weeks before. Marion, who had not seen her since, remembered the name—Mrs. Molyneux. It was stamped on her memory by

reason of its having been used as a pretext by the individual who had endeavoured to pump Aunt Jane during her own temporary absence from the flat.

It did not, of course, follow that Mrs. Molyneux was personally known to the mysterious "Mr. Percy," of whom nothing further had been seen or heard. The man might have chosen the name at haphazard from the list of residents on the number-board in the entrance-hall, and have annexed it to account for his presumed mistake in calling at the wrong flat; but none the less Marion could not but feel interested in the dark, bright-eyed little woman with the exquisite figure and the irreproachable clothes, who took the corner seat at the far end of the compartment on the opposite side.

Mrs. Molyneux had also provided herself with a goodly stock of magazines, and applied herself to them after one smiling well-bred glance round the compartment—a glance which comprehended everyone without settling on anybody in particular. As the train rolled out of the terminus she turned over the pages as though in search of something interesting, and by the time the engine had gathered speed she had apparently found it. For with a little shrug of satisfaction she nestled into her corner and read steadily.

Marion, in spite of the absorbing interview ahead of her, was fascinated by the carelessly graceful pose of a fellow-passenger who already had some claim on her attention. She found herself taking sly peeps at the engrossed, expressive face of Mrs.

Molyneux, and gradually there recurred to her the sensation she had experienced of previous familiarity with the *piquant* features when they had looked down upon her from the second-floor landing at Grandison Mansions.

And somewhere between Sittingbourne and Faversham Marion mastered the puzzle. Mrs. Molyneux's vivacious countenance was that of the lady to whom the short man with the fierce eyes had bowed adieu at Weybridge station on the day when she had gone down to give Armytage his final instructions. Only now did Marion understand what an impression the eyes of the briefly-apologetic little man who had stumbled against her had made.

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE JETTY.

THERE was nothing in the discovery that Mrs. Molyneux had passed through Weybridge station on the day of the attempt to shoot Armytage to alarm Marion, any more than there was to connect the short man with the fierce eyes with that attempt. Thousands of people must have used the station of the favourite residential suburb that day, and it never occurred to her that either Mrs. Molyneux or the male companion who separated from her at the station could have been concerned in the affair at Pinecroft.

To have suspected them on such slender grounds would have been to reduce the art of subtle deduction to an absurdity, and Marion, having settled the question why Mrs. Molyneux's face seemed familiar, took but little further interest in her. Possibly if they had been alone in the compartment she might have introduced herself and mentioned "Mr. Percy's" intrusion, but she could not well open up a conversation with a perfect stranger on a delicate subject across the elderly couple who divided them.

The journey was uneventful, and at Broadstairs Marion found that the coincidence which had made Mrs. Molyneux her fellow-traveller so far was not to be extended further. At any rate, that lady showed no signs of leaving her seat so long as Marion was within sight of the compartment, and the girl, full of the coming meeting with Nigel Lukyn, soon forgot what appeared to be such a trivial matter.

It was nearly six and quite dark when Marion drove up to the Grand Hotel, which a sense of the proprieties caused her to select in preference to the Royal Albion, whence Lukyn, in the name of Armytage, had wired her of his arrival. Having engaged a private sitting-room and bedroom, she wrote a note to her lover, asking him to meet her on the jetty forthwith. She addressed the envelope to "Leslie Armytage, Esqre.," reflecting that Nigel would have registered under the same borrowed name which he had used in his telegram.

The young millionairess wrapped her furs closely round her as she sallied forth into the chill air of the November evening. A raw south-easterly breeze was blowing along the sea-front and sending the waves with an angry rumble onto the beach below the low cliffs. Marion had followed so hard on the heels of her messenger that she was first at the rendezvous, and she stationed herself under the fluttering lamp over the door of the life-boat house at the shore end of the jetty, whence she could readily observe anyone who approached. In the inclement weather she had the place to herself.

Those few minutes of waiting for the man whom

her wealth and persistence had released from the lunatic asylum to marry her, brought her a swift revelation of the tremendous thing she had done. She had jumped with a girlish enthusiasm into the business without counting the cost. What if the man who must be even now making his way to her was really mad after all? Old Lady Lukyn loved her son dearly, she knew, and would not have had him lightly put under restraint.

The horrible thought was doubly horrible occurring now for the first time in the gloom of that deserted spot, with the wind sighing above, and the waves sagging among the timbers of the weather-worn jetty. It made her so nervous that she fancied that someone was watching her—perhaps Nigel himself—round the angle of the lifeboat-house, and at last she could bear it no longer. To end the suspense she darted round the corner. She could see no one—only the dim shape of an upturned boat and a pile of crab pots—and, chiding herself for her fears, she returned to the front of the structure and the more cheerful gleam of the lamp.

Here came her lover at last, striding down the sloping road that led from the sea-front above. There was no mistaking the broad, well-knit shoulders, the swinging walk, and the bold poise of the head. There was only one other who carried himself quite like that, and he was the man who at that moment must be under lock and key at Grey Gables, congratulating himself on the success of his task.

"Poor Mr. Armytage. I am afraid that he will

find time hang heavy on his hands, till he can recover for the second time and leave the asylum to enjoy his reward," thought Marion.

But there was no time to waste on the absent, with that tall form so near. Almost before she could realise it she was holding out her hand to greet her lover, ready to yield to his embrace should he proffer one, and angry with herself at her relief that he contented himself with a hand-shake.

"I—I thought it would be best for our first meeting to take place here—away from all possible eavesdroppers at the hotels," she said hurriedly. She dreaded the sound of his voice, yet was eager to hear it; for it might answer in the affirmative the terrible question she had just put to herself.

But no; the reply came in the deep-chested, well-modulated tones she knew so well, and there was no hint of madness in it:—

"It was very wise, for I have an idea that I was followed from the gates of Grey Gables. But I am distressed beyond measure that you should have chosen such an exposed place on such an unpleasant night to—to hear my news."

The gentle sentiment, not associated by Marion with her previous short acquaintance with Lukyn, dispelled her fears, and did more than that—it warmed her to him.

"How good of you to think of me after all you have gone through," she exclaimed. "But this following is bad news. They must have got wind of something at the asylum."

"It looks like it," was the reply. "The fellow shadowed me to Victoria, and there I lost him.

All the same he is here in Broadstairs—a little shrivelled old man like a monkey trying to chew nuts without teeth. I saw him during the afternoon. But now, Miss Fermor——”

“Miss Fermor!” came the quick interruption. “Call me Marion at once, sir, or be no longer officer of mine. I almost think our relations warrant the familiarity,” she added archly, for she felt a womanly desire to spur on a lover whose wooing had not shown this diffidence on the eventful day when he had taken her by storm. Masterful, Nigel Lukyn had been always, and even imperiously didactic, but he had never hung fire like this. Her quick sympathy went out to him, because he must have suffered sorely in the asylum for his spirit to be so crushed.

“Well, Marion, then, if you will have it so,” he jerked out awkwardly. And then, as though he recognised and regretted his rudeness, he went on in more level tones: “You must forgive me if I am not quite myself to-night, but this interview has been hanging over me like a nightmare. It is a difficult and—and a cruel thing to have to tell you what happened in the asylum. I hate to have to harrow you——”

“You won’t do anything of the kind, Nigel. I refuse to hear a single word of what passed at that horrid place,” Marion interrupted him again. And moved towards him by his new-found humility, and by a strange magnetic attraction that he had for her now for the first time, she flung her arms round him and, raising herself on tip-toe, pressed her warm lips to his.

"There!" she cried. "That is a token that I want no raking up of bygone horrors—a token that I am yours in the present and for the future, if you will take me, dear."

He whom she had kissed choked down something very like a sob, and then with a sudden stiffening of his whole frame that foreshadowed the firmness of his voice, he made answer—

"Then by that sweet token, my Marion, there shall be no raking up of the past. Take you? I will take you, my own self-bestowed flower and wear you, God willing, in the hope that you will some day forgive me for—for not having been a better man."

"There is nothing to forgive in misfortune, my poor, battered Nigel," cooed Marion, under the spell of awakened love, all the pity in her going out to him in his halting self-depreciation. And then to cheer her lover's obvious depression and strike a livelier key, she plunged into practical details. She would return to London in the morning, and he would follow by a later train and put up at the Hotel Colossal in Northumberland Avenue, still using the name of Leslie Armytage. They would at once apply for a licence as soon as the qualifying period was up, and be quietly married directly afterwards.

"And, Nigel," she added, "you had better be married in the name of the man who helped you so cleverly. If we started on our honeymoon as Mr. and Mrs. Nigel Lukyn before he was clear of that dreadful Grey Gables, Dr. Beaman might hear of it, and Mr. Armytage might get into trouble.

I should be so sorry for that. I put a supposititious case to a friendly young barrister the other day, and he told me that a marriage under a false name holds good provided both contracting parties are aware of it and mutually consent."

"I certainly ought not to object to using Leslie Armytage's name," was the grave reply.

"Then it is all settled, and we had better return to our respective hotels. I am simply famished, and I am sure that you must be. I would ask you to dine with me, only in case there is ever a fuss about this some day, I am anxious not to give Mrs. Grundy a loop-hole for scandal. Nigel, what are you doing?"

Marion's sudden *staccato* question was due to a rapidly-executed gymnastic feat on the part of her lover. They had been standing in front of the great folding doors of the lifeboat-house, facing the curve of the stumpy jetty and the sea. Her companion darted from her side, round the same angle of the building whence she had fancied herself watched just before his arrival, and returned, dragging a frail wisp of humanity into the light of the flickering lamp.

"This is the chap who has been foxing after me all day," he said, shaking his capture into an upright position. "Now, who are you, sir, and what do you mean by sneaking and prying?"

The lean little yellow man, held though he was in a grasp of iron, showed no dismay. "If you'll kindly loose me so as I can produce my card to the lady, sir, you'll see as I'm on the square," he panted. And he lugged out and presented to

Marion a dirty pasteboard on which was printed :
"Silas Peckthorne," with the significant words
"Quayne's Agency" at the foot.

"It is all right," said Marion to her lover.
"You will have heard that I have been employing
Quayne."

"And Quayne employs me," wheezed the old man. "I'm accounted about the best shadower in the business. The governor's orders were not to lose sight of the gent. when he come out of the asylum, and report if any other party was at the same game—following of him down here or wherever he might go."

"Were you round that corner a quarter of an hour since?" asked Marion, remembering her fright.

"No, but someone else was, I expect, miss," the old man replied. "Leastways, when I was coming round the back of the building a woman rose from behind a pile of crab pots and flitted away in the darkness."

"Ah, then she cannot have had anything to do with us," said Marion, serenely oblivious of the Molyneux coincidence. And turning to her lover, she added: "You know that Mr. Armytage was shot at on the day he went to Grey Gables?"

"Yes, I know that," was the answer.

"Well, Mr. Peckthorne's presence is the outcome of that, we shall probably find," Marion continued. "Quayne thought he might have been shot at in mistake for you, and he has evidently taken the precaution of furnishing you with protection when you left the asylum. The whole thing has puzzled

him and me, too, but now that you are free I dare say you can help us—that is, if you have an enemy ? ”

“ I have none that I know of.”

“ That is good hearing then, for of course you would know if you had any,” said Marion gaily. “ I confess that I rather disliked the idea of our being stalked through life by some mysterious individual burning for revenge. Mr. Quayne, also, will be glad to learn that the shot at Mr. Armytage was probably nothing more serious than the freak of a drunken man. But come, dear, let us get out of this biting east wind. Unless occasion arises before I shall see you to-morrow night at my flat.”

So they left the wind-swept trysting-place on the jetty, and side by side climbed the hill into the town, the tenacious Peckthorne plodding discreetly in the rear.

CHAPTER X.

QUAYNE'S WARNING.

MARION, having parted with her lover at the Royal Albion, went on to her own hotel, and, more at peace with herself than she had been for weeks, sat down to a solitary dinner in her private sitting-room. The meeting with Nigel Lukyn had been no ordeal after all. Chastened and depressed by his terrible experience, the poor fellow had lost the vague *traits* which had lately caused her qualms of repentance and apprehension, and was really quite lovable. And, best of all, the haunting fear that had seized her while waiting on the jetty was altogether unfounded. He was not the least bit mad.

"My first instinct in the conservatory at Penruddock Castle was the right one," she assured herself. "He is a good man—true, strong, brave, gentle and considerate. I shall end, I believe, in being very happy, and very, very fond of him."

She had finished her meal, and was settling down to a day-dream in front of the cosy fire, when the waiter, who had not long removed the dinner

equipage, reappeared, full of deprecating apology. Miss Fermor's was a name to conjure with—more potent than any officially-signed passport. The society papers had made the world familiar with the wealth of Martin Fermor's heiress.

"There's a gentleman—a Mr. Quayne, waiting to see you, miss," said the man. "I told him that it was very late for a lady to be disturbed."

"Show him up at once," said Marion; "and anyone else who asks to see me. I am in Broadstairs on business."

The waiter bowed and ushered in the visitor. John Quayne's emotions were not, as a rule, legible in the well-controlled facial muscles, but to-night he showed some slight traces of excitement as he took his client's hand.

"We have seen your Peckthorne," she said. "Mr. Lukyn forced him to introduce himself."

"So he tells me," replied Quayne with a dry smile. "I have just left him on watch outside the Royal Albion—on my way from the station. I thought it safer to have a man to look after Mr. Lukyn from the gates of the asylum till I could get to him myself, so Peckthorne has been in readiness outside Doctor Beaman's for a week. I am very glad that I took the precaution."

"But why?" Marion asked with a trace of annoyance. "Mr. Lukyn says he has no enemies, and I don't see why we should worry about that silly shot at Mr. Armytage, which must have been the merest chance."

"All the same, I am very anxious about your friend," said the detective quietly. "I have a very

strong case to unfold, but I should prefer to have Mr. Lukyn present, if you have no objection to my sending for him. He may be able to put an end to my theory once for all, or, by confirming it, place a weapon in my hand for protecting him from a dangerous conspiracy."

"By all means send for him," Marion assented. "Nothing would delight me more than the laying of this bogey. I am growing a little tired of it."

Quayne stepped out onto the landing, gave an order to a waiter, and, returning to the sitting-room, chatted with his client on indifferent topics till the door opened and Marion's lover entered.

This is Mr. Nigel Lukyn, or, as we have arranged to call him for the present, Mr. Leslie Armytage," said Marion. "Nigel, this is Mr. Quayne, who has been so useful to me in helping to procure your escape."

The detective's keen glance summed up the young man from head to foot. "Marvellous!" he exclaimed. "I never saw such a likeness. I am sure, sir, that you have every right to your double's name, for you might be the man himself. I should have addressed you in the street as Mr. Armytage, if I had met you casually."

"I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw my double in the asylum. I thought I was in front of the looking-glass," was the reply.

"He carried out his task satisfactorily? There was no hitch in exchanging clothes, or anything of the sort?"

"No hitch whatever."

"That's all right," said Quayne. "My client

has to pay him a big price for his services, so I thought I'd ask, though I reckoned Armytage up as a good sort who would pull you through. Now, Mr. Lukyn——"

"Call him Armytage, please," Marion interposed.

"We've got to do it in public, so we may as well get used to it in private. I mean to call him Lealie."

"Mr. Armytage, then," proceeded Quayne. "It will come a good deal easier, I can assure you, after my association with the other one. Well," and the detective's suave manner crystallised a little, "I want to ask you a simple question, Mr. Armytage—for your own protection. Have you ever been in America—the United States, to be precise?"

"I have."

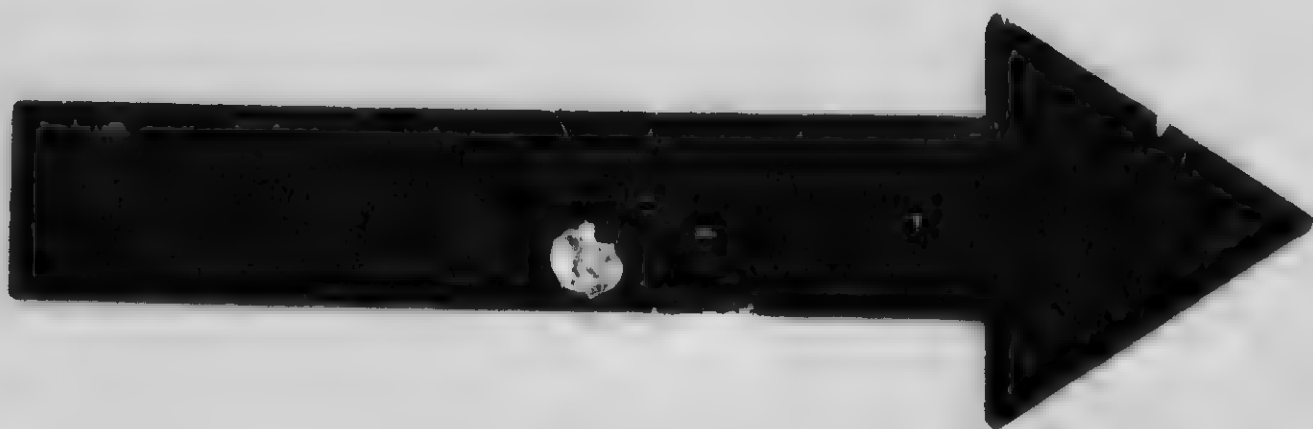
"Ah, that 'is interesting. And did you when there come into any sort of conflict with an anti-capitalist organisation known as the 'Knights of Industry'?"

"I never heard of them."

"Sure? Well, possibly you may have fallen foul of some individual member of the body, who has a grievance against you in his private capacity?"

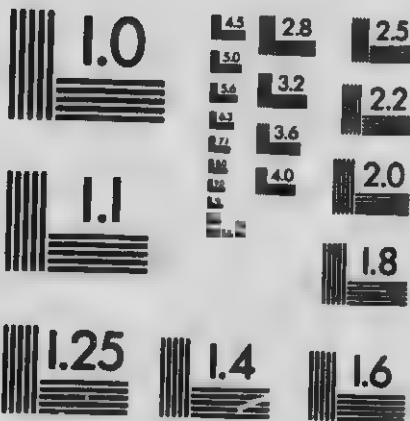
"I cannot be certain that I never trod on someone's corns in a railway car, but that would be the extent of it."

Marion laughed gaily, and flung herself into her chair before the fire, motioning the two men to be seated also. "There, Mr. Quayne," she exclaimed. "You see what a mare's nest you have got hold of. But let us have your reasons," she added quickly. "I am sure that you are far too clever



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to have been under these apprehensions without very good ones."

Marion's lover availed himself of the permission to sit down, taking a chair by the table, and leaning his head on one hand as though to shade his eyes from the electric light. Quayne, however, remained standing, whereby, by occasionally shifting his position, he obtained a better view of the faces of his audience. He thus partially countered the tactics, if tactics they were, of Doctor Beaman's late patient to keep his face hidden.

"You will remember, Miss Fermor," he began, "that I got a glimpse of the man who fired at the real Mr. Armytage in the garden of the house at Weybridge. We decided to let the matter drop, but for my own satisfaction I set to work to trace the man, and with the resources of my agency, that was child's play. In three days I had located him at the Hotel Colossal in Northumberland Avenue, where he was, and is, staying with a companion who is, like himself, an American. I ascertained that one of them had registered as from the United States about a week before the shooting affair, in company with a lady who was staying at another hotel—the Majestic, in Charing Cross Road.

"I set the cable going to my New York representative, with the result that I have learned that the trio—Fayter Frayne, Scorrier Voules and Miss Berthe Roumier—are emissaries from the Secret Council of the Knights of Industry, charged with some particular service in England which we are unable to discover. The Knights of Industry

however, are suspected of having murdered several persons in America who have offended them or broken their rules, so that it is reasonable to deduce that they have crossed the Atlantic with some such object in view."

"This is weirdly interesting to their intended victim, but not to us," interjected Marion. "They must have made a bad mistake."

"Then they made it very methodically," Quayne rejoined. "The female member of the party shortly afterwards established herself at Grandison Mansions, in a small flat on the floor above yours, Miss Fermor, in the name of Mrs. Molyneux."

Marion was moved at last. "That woman?" she cried. "Why, she came down in the same compartment with me to-day, though she did not leave the train here. At least, I don't think so, unless she got out at the last moment."

Beyond a twitching of the nostrils, Quayne gave no sign that this was news to him. "I am not surprised to hear it," he said, "for I was convinced that she took up her quarters at the Mansions to watch you, and she must have done it to some purpose if she was the woman whom my fellow Peckthorne stumbled on behind the lifeboat-house. Well, to hark back, I put my boy, Badger, on as lift-attendant to keep an eye on the spurious Mrs. Molyneux, but, though the nipper is as keen as mustard, all he learned was what I knew before—that the lady was occasionally visited by one or other of the two American men. One of them did actually call upon her on the night of the intrusion of the self-styled 'Mr. Percy' at your flat."

"But now I must tell you more," Marion chimed in breathlessly, and rising in great excitement. "I only knew it this afternoon, when I sat opposite Mrs. Molyneux in the train and was puzzling out something that had been worrying me—where I had seen her before. She is a woman who travelled down to Weybridge that day with a fierce little man with a heavy black moustache, who got out and stumbled against me on the platform so that he had to apologise. He spoke like an American. Mrs. Molyneux, or whatever her name is, did not get out, but went on in the train."

"A Southampton train," said Quayne, his eyes glistening. "The thing is as clear as noonday. The fierce little American was Fayter Frayne, and in all probability Scorrier Voules was with them. Frayne got out to go to Pinecroft, to carry out his shooting programme. If successful he would have gone on to Southampton by a subsequent train, rejoined the others, and they would all have boarded one of the liners for New York. Having failed, he recalled them by wire, and they had to begin all over again—with the advantage in their favour that, no hue and cry being raised, they must have scented out the little juggle we meant to carry out at the asylum. They must have guessed that we did not dare set the police on their track for fear of queering our own game, and that they would be safe in London to try again."

Marion looked at her lover, still sitting in careless attitude, but with veiled eyes, at the table.

"It sounds convincing," she said thoughtfully.

"You are still certain, dear, that you have not incurred the enmity of these wretches?"

"I can only repeat that never to my knowledge have I come in contact with them or their organisation," was the reply, uttered rather impatiently.

Quayne threw a doubtful glance at the speaker and turned again to Marion. "To complete the chain," he went on, "we have the attempt of Scorrier Voules, under the alias of 'Percy,' to obtain from your aunt, Miss Middleton, the name of your agent—myself to wit—followed by Mrs. Molyneux's journey to Broadstairs to-day. I have no doubt that her purpose was to spy upon you, and that she was a witness of your meeting on the jetty. - Peckthorne could not discern her features in the darkness, but he described the woman he disturbed as young, active, and of slight figure. On the whole, I call it a pretty straight indictment."

The man at the table withdrew his hand from his face and, rising slowly to his full height, looked the detective squarely in the face. "I give you my word that I can throw no light on all this," he said solemnly. "I admit that you have acted as I should have done in your position, and that the precautions you have taken seemed necessary, though they were really quite uncalled for. These precious Knights of Industry must be after my double—the fellow who is still under Doctor Beaman's care at Grey Gables. I have no doubt that they will shortly find out their mistake."

"But, sir, these are very dangerous people ;

they may find out their mistake too late for your safety," Quayne replied significantly.

"Would it not be well to be guided by that opinion, dear," pleaded Marion, coming forward and resting her hand on her lover's shoulder. "Let us ask Mr. Quayne to continue his investigations, and in the meanwhile employ all the resources of his agency to take care of you."

The answer of the fugitive from Grey Gables was firm and decided. "That would be as bad to a man of my temperament as being followed about by the interesting trio from America," he said. "It would be most distasteful to me, and I cannot sanction any such course. If the Knights of Industry are such omniscient pursuers of an intended victim they will soon discover that I am not the man they want. At any rate this is my final word. I am not afraid of the risk."

"Then your instructions are not to proceed further in the matter? I am to withdraw all protection from Mr. Lukyn?" said Quayne to Marion.

"Yes," she replied, with a proud confidence that rang through the playfulness of her words. "I cannot start married life by subjecting my husband to a constant annoyance. He says that there is no risk to be afraid of, so I am not afraid. Though perhaps, dear, it would be wiser if you stayed at some other hotel than the Colossal, where Mr. Quayne tells us that two of the gang are to be found," Marion suggested to her lover.

"I should not dream of altering my plans on that account," he answered.

John Quayne took up his hat with a shrug, and, bidding the engaged couple good-night, strolled out on to the breezy sea-front and made his way to the Royal Albion, where he had engaged a bed. Two minutes after he entered, the young man who had just rejected his services came in and, passing him in the hall, nodded curtly as he went upstairs to his room.

"The fellow is a fool or worse, and ought never to have been taken out of the asylum. I should be sorry to insure his life for half-a-crown," the detective muttered as he turned into the coffee-room for some refreshment before seeking his own chamber.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPIDERS SPIN THEIR WEB.

ABOUT noon on the day after the events last related Miss Berthe Roumier once again invaded the privacy of Messrs. Scorrier Voules and Fayter Frayne in their sumptuous apartment at the Hotel Colossal. The eager little man, as usual, was pacing the floor when she entered, and his lanky comrade was resting his wealth of inches in a lounge chair; but he sprung to attention this time, moved by the importance of the news sparkling in the girl's face.

"You have marked him down? You have located Lukyn?" the two men exclaimed in a breath.

"Yes, I reckon you can congratulate me, boys, on a successful trip," cried Berthe, pirouetting to the mirror over the mantelpiece. "My reading of that rich minx's scheme was absolutely correct. She met Lukyn on the jetty at Broadstairs last night, and I overheard all their plans. She came back to London by the same train as myself this morning, though I kept out of her way to-day."

THE SPIDERS SPIN THEIR WEB. 91

"Then we are for Broadstairs—if Lukyn remains behind? We kept close, expecting that you would summon us," said Frayne and Voules together.

"There was no need to summon you," replied Berthe, striking a theatrical attitude. "The fly is even now on his way to the spider's web. Mr. Nigel Lukyn is following his lady-love by the next train, for the sake of appearances, I suppose, and he is to stay—where do you think? Right here at the Colossal."

Voules sat down heavily in his lounge chair and fumbled for a cigarette. "Neat, by thunder!" he murmured softly. "It is my turn next, then? A violent bravo like our Fayter would be of no use in a first-class London hotel. Something not quite so noisy as a Derringer pistol will be required."

Berthe Roumier, as ever with an eye to the proper "set" of the folds of her dainty tailor skirt, perched herself on the end of a saddle-bag couch. "I am not so sure that either of you will have a turn of any sort at the hotel," she rejoined. "You must remember that we are still in the dark as to the identity of Miss Fermor's adviser in the planning of her scheme. He must be a smart fellow, whoever he is, and it does not follow, because they laid low after the Weybridge blunder, that they have done nothing to probe the mystery of Fayter's shot at Lukyn's double. For all we know we may be under surveillance by Miss Fermor's astute collaborator."

"You think that you perceive the fine Roman

hand of a leading detective in his work ? " drawled Voules.

"It looks like that," Berthe Roumier assented. "Fortunately we have every facility for learning whether his attentions have been drawn our way before we strike our blow. As Lukyn will be staying under the same roof with you, you should be able to discover whether he is being protected by anyone."

"And if he is ? " asked Frayne sharply.

"In that case, my fiery friend, I shall have to refer the question to headquarters by cable in our cipher code," Berthe replied. "The Chief's instructions were that we should not needlessly sacrifice our lives and liberties, and he would probably replace us with a fresh executive not liable to suspicion."

"That would mean that we had failed, and should return home in disgrace with the Central Committee," said Frayne gloomily.

"Not a bit, Mr. Dismal," Berthe retorted pertly. "The lion's share of the work has been done in penetrating Miss Fermor's design to extricate her *fiancé* from the asylum—a consummation for which we have primarily to thank you, Fayter, for cabling headquarters when you thought you recognised Lukyn in the Strand. You are one of those, little man, who snatch success from their errors. Had you not mistaken the double for the real man the Committee would have been quiescent, in the belief that Lukyn was safe from us for an indefinite period as an inmate of Grey Gables. You'll get plenty of credit for that stroke

of genius, Fayter—more than you would if you had shot the wrong man."

Scorrier Voules ran his taper fingers through his wavy beard and chuckled: "Berthe, you must not be unkind. Our dear Fayter will never cease to lament that miss, wrong man or right man, just the same. But seriously, what do you propose if we see no signs, while Lukyn is at the Colossal, of his being safeguarded by this unknown adviser of Miss Fermor's? In other words, where do I come in? Am I to exercise my peculiar talents for Lukyn's removal from a world he has defiled?"

Miss Roumier was always more tolerant to the languid giant than to his peppery colleague, and she smiled indulgently. "All in good time, Scorrier," she said. "This must be your programme till I give the word."

And she went on—this attractive girl so strangely entrusted with the powers of life and death—to teach her subordinates the way they should go towards the deadly end of which they chattered so lightly. They were unknown to Nigel Lukyn by appearance, and he would not, unless Miss Fermor's untraceable agent had been more active than they hoped, even be aware of their names. They were to watch Lukyn steadily, and, if there was no trace of his being protected, get acquainted with him and ingratiate themselves.

"You are only indiscreet in private, Fayter, and you, Scorrier, are the soul of diplomacy at all times," she said. "We wiped out Homer Preston at 'Frisco with half the trouble this need

be. Sit near Lukyn at meals; have drinks with him at the bar—do anything, in short, to pick his brains. What we chiefly want to learn is whether he has heard of our bungling attempt on his double, and if so whether it has scared him, as being really meant for himself. Where they are going for their honeymoon would also be useful information, though I may be able to get that from Crispin, Miss Fermor's maid."

"Lukyn, being supposed to be still in the asylum, will naturally not pass under his own name while at this hotel?" said Frayne.

"Nor even be married under it," returned Berthe.

"He is going to use the name of Leslie Armytage, which, it appears, is that of the man personating him at Grey Gables."

There was silence among the confederates for a while, broken by the lazily-put but pertinent question from Voules: "Is the man really sane, Berthe? It occurs to me that it is a point which we ought to consider."

"Why?" snarled Frayne. "Our mandate is to kill him anyhow."

"Nevertheless, Scorrier is right," Berthe corrected him. "A madman would require different treatment—especially in the preliminaries. The cunning of a lunatic is proverbial, and I should imagine that he would give you more trouble to fathom his plans. But I could detect no sign of insanity in Mr. Nigel Lukyn's conversation with his girl on Broadstairs jetty. He has either been cured by the worthy Doctor Beaman, or else old Lady Lukyn had him shut up because of some

drunken freak or transient eccentricity. You, Scorrier, with your medical experience, ought to be able to diagnose his complaint when you see him."

"I shall certainly endeavour to do so," said the tall man musingly. "From my particular point of view the question is highly important."

"You mean as to the practice of your *specialité*?"

"Exactly! A loony might prove a difficult subject. His brain cells might not respond to treatment to the same extent."

"I should be sorry to undergo your treatment in any shape," laughed Berthe, and there was a cruel ring in her laughter that clashed with her *bizarre* prettiness as she leaped from her perch on the sofa and adjusted her toque at the mirror. Her deft fingers made some trifling re-arrangement, and then she turned upon the two men, her manner changed to one of quiet command.

"So now you know what to do," she said. "Keep your hands off him, and watch till I give the word. But you have permission, if opportunity arises, to allay, by the best means that may occur to you, any suspicions that he may have formed. For instance, if you can make him think that you are hoodwinked by his alias of 'Leslie Armytage,' you will have cleared the ground for our subsequent operations."

And with the additional instruction on no account to communicate with her personally at Grandison Mansions, but only by telegram or letter, she took leave of the pair and quitted the hotel.

CHAPTER XII.

PUT TO THE TEST.

MARION FERMOR's lover descended from a cab and entered the reception hall of the Colossal not many minutes after Berthe Roumier had passed out of the great swing doors. Giving his name to the clerk in the office as Leslie Armytage, he at once went up to the room allotted to him, and when his scanty luggage—the portmanteau and Gladstone bag which had accompanied "Arthur Clark" to Doctor Beaman's—had been brought up, he locked himself in and sat down to face the crisis of his life.

For there need be no attempt to keep a secret which the reader will have penetrated already. The name which the distinguished-looking guest had just registered at the bureau was the correct one. He was in truth Leslie Armytage, and had not fulfilled his mission of changing places with Nigel Lukyn, who was still an inmate of the asylum at Putney.

To explain Leslie's position, and in some degree to palliate it, it is necessary to take a very brief retrospect.

When he found that, beyond the shadow of doubt, Nigel Lukyn was really a dangerous lunatic, whose one idea was to do bodily mischief to Marion Fermor, he at once recognised the impossibility of proceeding with his own undertaking to let Lukyn loose upon the world. Could he have communicated with Quayne or with Marion herself, he would have advised them of the state of the case, but he had reason to believe that the letters of patients were perused by Doctor Beaman before being despatched, and he dared not risk the discovery of their scheme by writing about it.

He therefore carried out the original intention so far as recovery from his own feigned symptoms was concerned, but when, in a few weeks, the time came for his release he left the asylum himself, without any attempt to personate Lukyn, who, as a matter of fact, was at the moment again relegated to the close confinement of the refractory ward.

With a vague notion that it would be less of a shock to Marion if he broke the failure of her plan to her gradually, rather than alarm her by appearing at her flat in London, he went down to Broadstairs and sent the telegram as arranged. He had gone to meet her on the jetty fully intending to tell her everything. During the first few sentences that they exchanged he had been under the impression that she knew he was Armytage and not Lukyn. It had seemed impossible to him that, like though they were to each other, she could have mistaken him for the man who had wooed and won her.

Then, suddenly, she had called him "Nigel," and had hung her arms round his neck and kissed him. Loving her as he did, the wild intoxication of that kiss had maddened him. He drew the inspiration from the clinging passion of her lips that the sweet embrace was for him and him only—the outcome of a mutual sympathy that instinct told him had existed between them since they had been thrown together. He would chain her to him by that kiss, and allow her to remain under the misapprehension that he was Lukyn till wedded intimacy and confirmed affection should give him courage to divulge his deception.

Such had been his mental attitude on the jetty at Broadstairs, and he had maintained it with decreasing resolution during his subsequent interview with Marion in the presence of Quayne. The detective's concise indictment of the American gang left little doubt in his mind that they were really in pursuit of Nigel Lukyn, and gradually it had dawned upon him that to marry Marion might very probably subject her to early widowhood and possibly to personal peril. Quayne had given his opinion that the emissaries of the Knights of Industry had penetrated Marion's design for liberating Lukyn by providing a double, but they could not guess that he had broken his contract, and that the object of their vengeance was still at Grey Gables. If he took Lukyn's place as Marion's husband he would have to bear the brunt of whatever was intended for the other man.

Gladly would he have taken any risk for the

precious privilege of redeeming the "token" given him on the windy jetty if he might suffer that risk and its consequences alone. But that, if Marion loved him as he prayed she would in spite of his deception, could not be. She would have to run the risk of propinquity to a man going in peril of his life, and, should success crown the efforts of that murderous trio, would have to grieve for his death.

Then he tried to drown the voice of conscience by justifying himself, but failed miserably. To the argument that Marion would be infinitely happier as his wife than as that of Nigel Lukyn, who would have to incur the same menace and was a dangerous lunatic as well, there was a plain and simple answer. She need be the wife of neither if he did his duty and told her, before it was too late, the secret of his sudden temptation and the perfectly honourable motives that had governed his conduct in declining to carry out her wishes at Grey Gables.

Dare he tell her—in the hope that she would ratify the token she had given, and marry him in the knowledge that he was really Leslie Armytage? There had been passages in their intercourse while arranging his personation of Lukyn which had suggested that had she been free she would not have been indifferent to him. And that kiss! It was *his*—meant for him and him alone, or instinct would have snatched her lips from his and her arms from his neck before it was half given.

Yet the memory of that stolen joy was so sweet ;

it had awakened such yearnings in his breast, that he could not go back. There was the chance that she might turn upon him, all her maiden pride up in arms, and shower scorn upon his fraud. No, he dared not tell her.

"But she shall not marry me unless I can prove to myself that there is no reason for alarm," he said to himself, as he rose and paced the narrow limits of his room. "I will run away to the ends of the earth first, or put an end to myself. The means of proof ought not to be difficult to obtain, as Voules and Frayne are staying in this hotel. Happy thought! They shall have their chance to kill me to-night."

He had no sooner formed the idea than he left his room and went down to the ground floor of the great *caravanse-rai*, where a score or so of guests were lounging in that well-advertised feature of the Colossal—the continental court-yard. He was under the disadvantage of not knowing either of the men in whom he was interested by sight, but he trusted to the hawks disclosing themselves by hovering round the prey upon whom they meant to swoop. He sat down on one of the luxurious settees and took up a newspaper in order to give them a chance. It was pretty certain that they would have been apprised of his approaching arrival by the female spy who had listened to his conversation with Marion.

But for a long time nothing occurred to enlighten him as to the identity of the enemies he had inherited along with Lukyn's personality. Loungers left their seats and went away, their places were

taken by others, a constant stream of guests and callers passed through the hall to and fro between the entrance doors and the grand staircase and the lifts, but none of them paid any attention to him. Leslie had occupied his seat for nearly two hours before a tall gentleman with stooping shoulders and a waving, fair beard came swiftly down the stairs and, walking to the bureau, asked somewhat loudly if there were any letters or telegrams for Mr. Scorrier Voules, of Chicago. The words were hardly out of his mouth when he faced about like lightning and looked fixedly at Leslie.

Now the latter had observed Voules over the top of his newspaper, and he was only just in time to drop his gaze on to the columns without meeting the expressionless blue eyes so quickly turned upon him. He congratulated himself on his readiness of resource, for the object of the tall American's manœuvre was obvious. Mr. Voules had spoken his own name loudly to the clerk so as to discover whether it was known to Leslie, who, if he had been warned against the owner of that name, might very well have been expected to show signs of surprised alarm.

Leslie sat like a rock, with his eyes glued to the paper, till the scrutiny had passed, and Voules, having received the clerk's answer, had returned upstairs.

The ruse had failed, and Leslie felt that he had won the first trick in the deadly rubber which he was sitting down to play with the Knights of Industry. It was a distinct point in his favour to have learned that they were interested in him,

and that presumably danger was to be apprehended from them, without letting them know that he was forearmed as the result of Quayne's investigations. They would not be likely to take so much care in making their dispositions for his undoing.

He saw no more of Voules till he took his place at one of the circular *tables à quatre* in the great pillared banquetting saloon at dinner time. The other three seats at the table he selected were unoccupied, and the soup had just been served when Voules and a short, dark, heavily-moustached man sauntered down the aisle of pillars, appeared to hesitate, and, after a whispered colloquy and glances at the vacant places, passed on and chose seats at an adjacent table. Their backs as they sat were towards Leslie, but he could hear their talk, which was almost ostentatiously sustained in a false key on trivial topics of the day.

Dinner over, Leslie, now with a well-defined plan in his head, went into the Moorish smoking-room, and, sitting down, lighted a cigar. As he had expected, the two Americans almost immediately followed him and selected seats whence they could watch him unobtrusively. After a while, affecting a careless air, he rose and, after procuring hat and overcoat from his bedroom, left the hotel by the main entrance on Northumberland Avenue. A string of cabs was filing past, each vehicle stopping long enough to pick up one or more of the Colossal's guests for theatre or music hall. Leslie started to cross the roadway and took advantage of the crush to steal a glance behind

him. Voules and his companion were hard on his heels.

Striking down towards the Charing Cross Station of the District Railway, he passed on to the Embankment and turned eastwards towards the City. It was the hour when the great riverside thoroughfare is least frequented by foot-passengers. Business folk had all gone home, and the homeless waifs who "doss" on the seats had not yet taken up their quarters for the night.

Walking listlessly, as though with no graver purpose than an after-dinner stroll, he went on as far as the back of the Temple Gardens, and then, selecting a peculiarly deserted stretch of pavement, he suddenly turned and went back on his tracks. He had known that two pedestrians had been behind him, and now, by the light of the great electric arc beneath which they were passing, he saw that they were the two Americans. They came on. In twenty paces he would meet them.

"If they knife me and chuck me over the parapet into the river, well and good. If they put me to the question and accept my denial, not only well and good, but the very gate of Elysium," he told himself.

The two men advanced, nothing menacing in their manner and apparently deep in conversation; but as they seemed about to pass him they both wheeled and halted of one accord. The tall man spoke—

"Mr. Nigel Lukyn, I believe? We thought that we recognised you at the Hotel Colossal."

"No, indeed," was the perfectly truthful reply.

"I have been taken for a lunatic of that name before, and it is beginning to be a bit of a nuisance. My name is Leslie Armytage—late of the 24th Hussars, and very much at your service."

The two edged up close, peered hard into his face, and muttered audibly to each other.

"By thunder, Frayne, who could have imagined such a resemblance; yet it certainly isn't Lukyn," said the tall man. "There is a slight difference in the contour of the jaw."

"I can see it plainly," was the curt response.

Whereupon Mr. Scorrier Voules, the diplomatist of the pair, broke into a flood of apologies, to which the guttural bass of Mr. Fayter Frayne formed a running but unintelligible accompaniment; and then, linking arms together, they continued their progress eastwards along the Embankment.

Leslie could hardly restrain himself from shouting for joy. "It has come off all right. There is no danger to myself or impending trouble for Marion," he murmured as he looked after the receding figures. In so doing he caught and responded to the invitation of a prowling hansom driver.

"Grand ion Mansions," he said, as the cab drew to the kerb.

CHAPTER XIII.

AUNT JANE SEES A DIFFERENCE.

MARION FERMOR awaited the advent of her lover in the cosy luxury of the drawing-room at her flat, and at the same time tried to nerve herself to break to Aunt Jane the news that he was no longer an inmate of Grey Gables.

She rather dreaded the ordeal, for the old lady had taken a keen dislike to Nigel Lukyn on the one occasion when she had seen him, and had made no secret of her relief at the untoward termination of the engagement. The young man had been in one of his "moods" on the day when Marion had brought him to tea at the flat, and had treated Aunt Jane with scant courtesy.

Marion could not bring herself to confess to her good-natured relative the steps she had taken to procure Nigel's release, but as he might put in an appearance any minute it was necessary to say something, and that quickly. The moment was to some extent propitious, for Aunt Jane had dined well, and was enjoying the warm comfort of her favourite couch by the fire.

"Aunty," said the girl at length, "I am afraid I'm going to give you a shock, but you are such a dear you'll bear it for my sake, won't you? Nigel has escaped from the asylum. I expect him here directly."

The old lady reared her ample proportions into a sitting posture and stared helplessly at her niece. "That madman—coming to these rooms—to-night?" she ejaculated in little gasps, shaking visibly.

"He is no more mad than I am, darling, and I have always maintained as much," replied Marion. "And if there ever had been a shadow of a pretext for believing to the contrary there is none now. I saw him last night, and a more rational, harmless being does not exist."

"*Saw him last night—alone, at Maidenhead?*" Aunt Jane almost screamed. As a chaperon she was prepared to allow a wide latitude, but this was appalling.

"Listen, aunty dear!" cried Marion, going over to her and kneeling at her side. "I did not go to Maidenhead at all. That was all a pious fraud, so that I need have said nothing about it if it hadn't turned out all right. The telegram was from Nigel, telling me of his escape and asking me to meet him at Broadstairs. I went down and saw him—we stayed at different hotels, of course—and he is perfectly right and sane. I wouldn't even let him come to town by the same train for fear of talk, but he is to call here this evening. And, aunty, we are going to be married in a fortnight—as soon as we can get a licence."

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"Going to be married in a fortnight!" was all that the poor lady could falter. The imminent catastrophe called up emotions too deep for words.

"Yes, and we have settled that he is to take the name of Armytage—Leslie Armytage—for the present, in case of his being searched for by his mother or that wretched Doctor Beaman. I have begun to call him so already, and you will do so too, dear, won't you—especially before Crispin, who was luckily away on her holiday when he came to tea. The other servants are all new since then."

Marion spoke breathlessly, not only because there was need for haste, but hoping to carry the castle by storm.

Aunt Jane sighed heavily, and let one plump hand fall on her niece's forehead. "You ask a great deal of me, child," she whimpered. "If it was only any other man. But Nigel Lukyn, fresh from a lunatic asylum, and all this subterfuge——"

There came a tap at the door, and the demure Crispin entered with her stealthy, gliding step to announce—

"Mr. Leslie Armytage."

Shooting an anxious glance at Aunt Jane, who had given no pledge as to her behaviour, Marion rose to greet the visitor.

"Here you are at last, Leslie," she said, proffering a nervous cue for the old lady to take up. If there was to be an explosion she did not want it to go off before the maid had left the room. Crispin retired, closing the door, and Marion breathed more freely.

"Yes, I am a little late, I fear," said the new arrival, who had doffed his overcoat in the hall and stood before the two women, a somewhat diffident but handsome figure in his dress clothes. Aunt Jane, who had risen laboriously from the sofa, was gazing at him out of a pair of shrewd eyes from under half-closed lids. Leslie was conscious of the gaze, and returned it—questioningly.

"You remember Aunt Jane?" said Marion.

"Of course he does," snapped the old lady.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Armytage?"

"How do you do?" replied Leslie, shaking the hand extended to him, and in bending over it trying to hide his confusion. Marion had told him so much about Lukyn—at least, as many details as the latter had chosen to confide in her about his past life, and their brief courtship—that he felt assured of being able to keep up the deception with her for the short time it would be necessary. But he had overlooked the fact that he might be confronted with friends and relations of hers who had met Lukyn under circumstances of which he was ignorant.

The danger passed, however, in the nervous chatter which Marion at once inaugurated in the hope of drawing her lover out, and of convincing Aunt Jane by the sanity of his replies that he ought never to have been sent to Grey Gables. The innocent ruse, to all appearance, worked well. Aunt Jane had reseated herself on the couch, and Marion, watching her closely, saw with a thrill of triumph the normal kindly expression returning by degrees to the elderly face. The young man's

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most demeanour and chivalrous air of deference was evidently making a convert of Aunt Jane.

At least so Marion hoped, for Leslie himself was conscious of being subjected to a profound scrutiny by the old lady on the sofa. At present there was nothing aggressive or hostile about it; indeed it seemed to be altogether benevolent and approving. But there was a persistence in Aunt Jane's unwavering attention, not only to his face, but to his slightest movement, that made Leslie dread discovery.

Presently Aunt Jane addressed him directly, and to his guilty conscience it seemed that there was a set purpose in her question—

"You feel that you are justified in marrying my niece under the existing extraordinary circumstances, Mr.—ahem—Armytage?"

"You allude to my recent detention in a lunatic asylum?" hazarded Leslie.

"Are you aware of anything else to which I could allude?" returned Aunt Jane, with a severity that sent Leslie's heart to his boots. But the next moment she relieved him with the muttered addition: "As if that wasn't enough."

Leslie seized the opening and used it judiciously. "Marion doesn't mind, and perhaps I ought to be contented with that. At the same time it would be a great grief to me to do anything that would be a source of anxiety to one who has such claims on my future wife's affection and regard as yourself," he made answer.

Marion was delighted with her lover's politeness—all the more so as it was so unlike the

impetuous Nigel of her hasty betrothal. Aunt Jane's beautiful lace cap had fallen awry in the energy of her questioning, and the girl went over to her and adjusted it lovingly.

"There, you old darling, he couldn't put it nicer than that, could he?" she cooed, as, having straightened the erratic headgear, she nestled up to the stout figure and fondled the plump hands on the ample lap.

Aunt Jane sighed satisfactorily. "No, dear, I suppose not," she said. "But I am an old-fashioned body, and for a young lady to marry an escaped—I mean a gentleman with Mr.—ahem—Armytage's recent experience, is a little startling to me. But though I have never been married myself, worse luck, and know but little about men, I can see nothing wrong about this one. You can count upon me as an ally against all opposing forces, young people."

After this Leslie felt more secure, and exerted himself to make good the footing he had obtained in the estimation of one who might have proved a formidable antagonist—might even have communicated with Doctor Beaman, when chaos would have supervened. And he exerted himself so successfully that he was presently in danger again; for Aunt Jane, in her new enthusiasm for his cause, suddenly launched the question—

"What did you do to make Lady Lukyn treat you so badly—you her only son, as I have been given to understand?"

"I cannot imagine. I am not conscious of ever having so misdeigned myself as to merit

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any ill-treatment whatever at Lady Lukyn's hands," Leslie replied, priding himself inwardly on the truth of his answer. As a naturally truthful man it was one of the penalties of his imposture that he had at every turn to wrack his brain for subterfuges which should not be absolute lies. He would have broken down and thrown the whole thing away if Marion's eyes, glistening on him in the dancing firelight, had not given him courage to push on to his goal. For those dear eyes told him that she loved him—*him*, Leslie Armytage, the man before her, not Nigel Lukyn, babbling and fighting in the refractory ward at Grey Gables.

"Her ladyship must be a strange person," was Aunt Jane's comment. "But she will be stranger still if she doesn't move heaven and earth to find you. She must know by this time that you have got away from the asylum."

Leslie was spared further prevarication by Marion, who said hurriedly: "That is why we are to be married in the name of Armytage to prevent any search she may institute from succeeding. You may rest assured, aunty dear, that Lady Lukyn won't connect the gentleman who is marrying me with her son. She will think that I have jilted him, and that I am just consoling myself. Besides, not a soul but we three is to know that I am to be married till after the event—not even Crispin."

"And where is this wonderful ceremony to be performed?"

"At St. James's, Piccadilly, at noon on the 5th of December," was the reply. "I propose

that we should afterwards go to Eyot Cottage at Maidenhead for a couple of days, and then join the yacht for a cruise down south. What is the matter, aunty?"

"A draught," replied Aunt Jane, who had risen from the sofa and was holding up her palms in a quaint gesture intended to discover the direction of the disturbing influence. "Ah, it must be the door come open. Would you mind looking, Mr. Armytage, and shutting it if I am right. I am so very susceptible to draught."

Leslie sprang to obey the request. The door was covered by a heavy portière curtain, hung on a rod and opening and closing with the door. As he approached it he fancied, though he was not sure, that it moved slightly away from him, but, drawing the curtain, he found that the door was shut. His announcement of the fact made Aunt Jane quite angry.

"It must have been open," she insisted. "You must have closed it, sir, in disarranging the curtain, for the draught has ceased now."

Marion, who was used to her relative's whims and fancies, laughed and made a *moue* at her lover, who soon afterwards took leave of the two ladies. Marion accompanied him into the little *entresol* of the flat, where Crispin, summoned by the drawing-room bell, was in attendance to give him his hat and overcoat. The natty maid with the downcast eyes had a higher colour than when she had admitted him, and Leslie wondered whether she had had anything to do with the mysterious draught.

But what mattered it if she had listened? The

only crumple in his rose-leaf had been smoothed by that scene on the Em. ankment earlier in the evening, when the two Yankees had accepted his disclaimer that he was Nigel Lukyn. Granted that this somewhat feline maid had convinced herself to the contrary, and that her young mistress was about to wed her acknowledged *fiancé*, it could only upset his plans if she sold the secret to Lady Lukyn, an impoverished old woman whose meagre patronage would not compare with the benefits which fidelity to Marion would secure. It never crossed his mind that Crispin could be in communication with the Americans.

Marion returned to the drawing-room and found Aunt Jane beaming at her.

"Never saw such a change, my dear!" exclaimed the estimable spinster. "I don't believe now that he ever was insane. But for all that he had some bad habits, and Doctor Beaman has cured them. His manners are quite pretty now, and did you notice his finger nails?"

"What on earth do you mean, aunty?"

"I said his finger nails, child. He used to bite 'em down to the quick—sure sign of a demon's temper. He was at it all the while he was here before, but to-night there wasn't a trace of the habit, and, what's more, he can't have been at it for a considerable time. His nails were as nice and well tended as any gentleman's should be. I gladly concede you the change of name, as it carries with it a change from so much nastiness. In fact, I concede you the man himself. I like him."

"Dear Aunt Jane," Marion murmured, kissing her.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PERIL BEGINS.

THE period that intervened to the date fixed for the wedding passed without any untoward incident to alarm Leslie into a change of plans. He saw Scorrier Voules and Fayter Frayne almost daily in and about the Colossal, but with the exception of a stiffly apologetic bow, intended to convey regret for their mistake on the occasion of their first meeting, they appeared to take no further interest in him. He had no reason to doubt the complete acceptance by them of his denial that he was Nigel Lukyn, and he was therefore satisfied that his marriage to Marion would involve her in no grave consequences from his assumed personality.

The wedding morning broke clear and frosty. At the unfashionable hour of noon the limited party, consisting only of the bride and bridegroom, Aunt Jane, and a couple of vergers, had the church all to themselves. Crispin, decorously undemonstrative on being informed at breakfast time of the impending ceremony, had been dispatched

straight to Paddington with her mistress's boxes. Leslie had his belongings on the waiting hansom which had brought him from the hotel, and which was to take the wedded pair to the station.

In the vestry Aunt Jane and one of the vergers signed the register as witnesses, and then, without any warning, Leslie fell into one of the ambushes which were to dog his path for days to come. The elderly senior curate who had tied the nuptial knot, a man of the world, like most West End clergymen, was well aware that something uncommon was happening in this quiet, almost clandestine, wedding of the famous heiress. He uttered a dry little cough, and addressed Leslie with an air of ponderous playfulness.

"I never thought that I should have the pleasure of doing this service for the son of my old friend General Armytage," he said. "At least, I presume that you are his son, as you bear the same Christian name. I mean General Leslie Armytage, late of the Royal Horse Guards, who afterwards lived at Cloudesly, in Oxfordshire. I trust that he is well?"

Leslie, feeling Marion's eyes on him, and with the reminiscence of an episode in the South African war, when he had been suddenly bidden "Hands up" by an overwhelming party of Boers, buzzing in his brain as a parallel to his present dilemma, sought deliverance in brevity.

"General Armytage died some years ago," he made non-committal answer.

"Sorry," murmured the curate, and in the

congenial task of pocketing his *douceur* forebore to press an obviously uncommunicative man.

At the church door, amid smiles and tears, Aunt Jane took leave of the newly-married couple, but without undue emotion, as she was to join them again two days later on board the yacht at Southampton. As soon as they were in the cab, bowling away to Paddington, Marion thrust her hand under her husband's coat-sleeve and said—

"How awfully clever of you to know that General Armytage was dead, and so stop that silly old parson's questions. I suppose that the real Leslie Armytage posted you up about it at that horrid place?"

Thus it was that Leslie suffered agonies in the first five minutes of his married life. He had to search for words which, without being an absolute lie, should deceive the fond girl gazing up at him, and who believed that he was Nigel Lukyn.

"No, darling," he said. "Armytage did not speak of his father at all while at Grey Gables. It is matter of common knowledge that General Armytage is dead. He was an officer of considerable distinction, and I remember hearing of it at the time."

"Poor Mr. Armytage, to have met with such misfortunes," said Marion thoughtfully. "I liked him so much, too. He was more like a courteous friend to me than someone fetched in, literally out of the streets, to help me for hire."

Dare he reveal himself while she was in this mood, Leslie asked himself. There was a gentle strain of melancholy in her voice as she spoke

of him that thrilled him with hope that she might forgive the deception for the sake of the man. But before he could nerve himself to the ordeal of confession she spoke again—fateful words that tied his tongue not only then, but through the fateful time to come, till secrecy mattered no longer.

"And yet," Marion went on musingly, "in a minor degree the real Mr. Armytage must have deceived me. Those Americans must be after him, in spite of his declaration that he had no enemies. I wish he had told me the truth, for I can never give my confidence to anyone who has tried to mislead me with a falsehood."

So Leslie's half-formed resolution to throw himself on her mercy was annihilated, and the prospect of the future kept him silent and preoccupied during the rest of the drive. If that was her attitude towards deceivers, how could he ever make confession—how could he ever break down the unseen barrier which his action had raised between them? Would wedded love be strong enough to shatter it, or would love itself go down before the shock?

His gloomy reflections were cut short by arrival at the terminus, where they found Crispin on the departure platform standing guard over a pile of luggage. The maid's demeanour was absolutely correct and suited to the circumstances. The ghost of a smile on her pale face, and a tinge of additional alacrity in attending to her mistress's comfort, was all the tribute she paid to the occasion. It was as though she had openly said: "You

wish for a quiet wedding, and it is my duty to see that you have it."

While Marion was conferring with her as to the bestowal of the luggage, Leslie, standing a little aside, felt himself violently smacked on the shoulder. Turning on his heel he was confronted by a bronzed gentleman, heavily swathed in travelling garments. It was Major Desmond Charteris, the second in command of his old regiment, one of his mess-room cronies in the palmy days that were gone.

"What, Armytage, old chap!" cried the genial Major. "This is a piece of luck. Haven't seen you since you left us, by Jove! Going down the line? If so, we'll chum in together."

Leslie was conscious that Marion and Crispin had ceased their conference to watch this untimely meeting. Again he felt as if he was being "held up" by his old foes of the veldt, and again he summoned all his resourcefulness to his aid. This blustering soldier required different treatment to the fee-hunting curate, for he knew him personally—more or less intimately. Blank denial of his identity and his name would not serve him, because it would set that keen-faced maid all agog; yet to own to it, and to previous acquaintance with Charteris, would arouse Marion's suspicions. He took the middle course—a course which set Crispin's dark eyes sparkling.

"You have made a very natural mistake, sir," he said. "You are probably confusing me with a twin brother. We are very much alike."

"Alike, by Gad! You're the spit of each other," exclaimed the worthy Major, and catching sight

of Marion's concentration on the meeting, and the maid's raised eyebrows, he realised that somehow he was in the way. He raised his deerstalker cap and retired with all the honours of war and with a firm belief in his own diagnosis of Armytage's identity.

But Leslie was once more respited, and cared little what his old brother officer might think, so long as he retained Marion's love. To that he clung with the tenacity of despair, knowing how soon he might lose it, and when they were seated in the reserved compartment which Crispin had secured for them he tried to forget that he had won his sweet companion by false pretence. In the elation of the moment he even jokingly accepted her renewed congratulations on his smartness in repulsing the obtrusive Major without denying in Crispin's presence that his name was Armytage.

"And you might very well have been a twin brother with that poor fellow," she purred complacently. "You were always exactly like him in form and face and voice, but now that I know you better I find that you are like him in disposition too."

The journey to the riverside resort was all too brief, for, once out of the train on the crowded platform at Maidenhead, Leslie feared that his troubles might recommence at any moment. Someone who had known him in the past might crop up and claim acquaintance so insistently as to break down his guard, or, worse still, some old friend of Nigel Lukyn's might appear with awkward results. In the latter case he would have,

in Marion's presence, to deny that he was Lukyn, while all the time she believed that he was, and he shrank from having to perpetrate what she would regard as a flat lie before her. It would be a grosser and more clumsy device than the mild prevarications with which he had got rid of previous questioners, and, though she would recognise the necessity for it, it would lower her respect for him.

That fall would have to come some day, but not yet, he prayed—not yet, till many happy hours together should have merged respect in all-conquering love.

But there were no pitfalls in store for him at Maidenhead Station, and Marion's brougham quickly whirled them to the seclusion of her pretty riparian residence. Eyot Cottage was a cottage only in name. It was really a miniature mansion, approached through lodge gates at the entrance of a drive, at the end of which the long, low house of modern construction was nearly hidden among a grove of beeches a hundred yards away. The grounds showed everywhere the traces of lavish wealth tastefully spent. Behind the house a velvet-turfed, shrub-girt lawn sloped down to the river and the private landing-stage, where quite a fleet of miniature craft, with a motor launch as flagship, was moored.

No need to follow the lovers through the flying hours of the short winter day, spent for the most part in a joint exploration of the Cottage and its grounds. Leslie's lucky star was in the ascendant, inasmuch as he was not only nominally but actually a stranger to the premises, and he was not called

on to simulate a familiarity with the place. For he knew that Nigel Lukyn had never been a visitor at Eyot Cottage during his brief engagement.

Marion and Leslie dined *à-tête* in a room with French windows giving on to the lawn at the back of the house, and afterwards they elected to remain there in preference to seeking the less cosy expanse of the great drawing-room across the hall. Here at Eyot Cottage, in contrast to the homely flat which had formed Marion's "diggings" in her girl-bachelor days, a full staff of servants was kept, most of them old retainers dating back to her father's lifetime, and imbued with a loyalty to their mistress which insisted that she could do no wrong. The silver-haired butler who waited on the bride and bridegroom betrayed no emotion at the advent of a master, beyond performing his functions with the solemnity of a high priest officiating at some important ritual.

This ancient servitor, with his attendant satellite, had not long departed from the room when there came a tap at the door and Crispin entered. Her errand, it seemed, was to request her mistress to come upstairs and inspect a priceless tiarra of diamonds which, though carefully bestowed in the jewel-case, had been unaccountably broken on the journey down.

"Oh, bother you, Crispin. So long as the thing isn't missing, you surely needn't worry about it to-night," said Marion, laughing.

"I beg your pardon, madam, but in fairness to myself," the maid insisted respectfully. "I

could not sleep unless you had checked the loose stones that have been shaken from their settings. There are quite a number of them, and they can't be left as they are."

"Oh, if you put it like that," said Marion, rising good-naturedly. And, assuring her husband that she should not be long, she went away to satisfy Crispin's conscientious scruples.

Leslie sat for a few minutes, smoking his cigarette, and then walked over to one of the French windows, both of which were draped with heavy curtains. Drawing the curtain aside, he stood gazing across the moonlit lawn towards the river. The peaceful scene tempted him, and unfastening the catch he stepped out for a breath of fresh air, for the atmosphere of the room was heavy with the scent of hot-house flowers. In his thin shoes he avoided the open stretch of lawn and struck into a gravel path that skirted it, running through an avenue of evergreen shrubs to the river bank. Down this he sauntered, and, after a glance at the swiftly flowing stream, returned towards the house by the way he had come. But at the point where the shrubs ended he came to a sudden halt, drawing back a little into the leafy screen.

On leaving the dining-room he had closed the French window behind him, and through the uncurtained plate glass panels part of the brilliantly lit interior was plainly visible—the richly-furnished dessert table, and the two chairs drawn to the fire, so recently vacated by Marion and himself. But what held him spell-bound was the figure of a man silhouetted against the light—the figure of

a tall man with stooping, studious shoulders and a wavy beard, who was peering into the room through the window.

Leslie had no difficulty in recognising the marked characteristics of the inquisitive stranger. He was one of the two men who had waylaid him on the Embankment a fortnight before, and whom he had fondly imagined that he had disarmed with his disavowal of being Nigel Lukyn.

And now, on his wedding night, this lazily plausible gentleman from over seas was lurking outside the house—with what motive he could all too surely guess. But the means he would employ? What murderous devilry had he plotted for slaying the man whose pains and penalties Leslie Armytage had taken over with the identity of Nigel Lukyn?

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECOND INTRUDER.

THE tall man did not remain long at the French window. Contrary to Leslie's expectations he made no attempt to open the window and enter the room—perhaps to conceal himself with murderous intent—but flitted round the corner of the house towards the gardens in front, by which route alone could he leave the premises. The presumption was that his present visit was only one of espionage, and Leslie breathed a sigh of relief that the crisis was deferred.

As Marion was evidently not in the room he decided to wait a few minutes in case the uncanny visitant should return to the window, in which event Leslie began to form a wild plan of attacking him in the rear and of forcing from him a confession of his intentions. Threatened with capture and imprisonment, the fellow might be induced to abandon his designs without compelling him to again deny that he was Lukyn—a risky proceeding with Marion expected back in the room at any moment.

But there was no time accorded him for the shaping of his plan, nor yet any opportunity of bringing the bearded prowler to book, for though once again a figure glided into view it was not that of Scorrier Voules. From the opposite angle of the house to that round which the latter had disappeared came a female form, stealing noiselessly in the shadow of the building to the uncurtained French window, where it stopped, appeared to hesitate for a moment, and then, to Leslie's amazement, unhasped the catch and crossed the threshold into the room, leaving the window open.

Full of wonder as to what this strange intrusion might forebode, Leslie strode rapidly forward, in the meanwhile keeping his eyes on the woman, who was plainly visible in the brilliantly lighted interior. She advanced quickly towards the table, and then, just as she reached it, reeled and fell heavily to the floor.

Now thoroughly alarmed and perplexed, Leslie ran across the intervening space, and, passing through the open window, was immediately conscious of a feeling of suffocation. He could detect no odour but that of the lilies and tuberoses on the table, but some impalpable influence clawed at his lungs and his throat, stifling him and causing him to stagger as he rushed to the unknown woman's assistance.

Just as he was wondering whether he was going to faint before he could be of any use to her, the oppression cleared off and in doing so furnished him with a clue to its cause. The first mysterious visitant had introduced into the room some kind

of poisonous gas, which was being quickly dispersed and neutralised now that the window was open, but not before the equally mysterious person prone at his feet had been overcome by it.

Stooping over her, he saw that she was quite a young girl, plainly and rather shabbily dressed, and utterly unknown to him. He was in two minds whether to ring for assistance in restoring her, or to search first for the cause of her sudden collapse, when signs of returning consciousness decided him in favour of the latter course. A hasty glance round the room revealed nothing wrong, and then, moved by a swift instinct, he looked behind the curtains veiling the other window. Sure enough he had solved the enigma. Between the heavy plush drapery and the window stood a curiously shaped flask with a metal top, somewhat resembling that of a soda-water syphon.

His hand flew promptly to the bolt of the window, which ought to have been shot home, as that of the other window had been before he sought egress by it. This window, however, was unbolted, and the horrible suspicion seized him that it had been deliberately left so by someone in the house. A subtle odour, faint and undistinguishable, still lingered round the metal escape-cock of the death-dealing phial, but it had no visible contents.

He was carrying the contrivance to the light, the better to examine it, when an inarticulate cry from the girl on the floor caused him to set the vessel down on the table and hurry to the unknown's side. Raising her head on his shoulder,



"Stooping over her, he saw she was quite a young girl."

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he was bending to catch her utterance, when the door opened and Marion swept into the room. The playful apology for her long absence died on her lips as she took in the unexpected scene—her husband supporting a strange woman in his arms, one window open, and the curtains of the other disarranged.

"What is this?" she demanded, with a catch of her breath.

"I wish I could tell you," Leslie replied. "I went for a stroll down to the river, and on my return saw a man looking into the room. He went away, and then this girl came round the house and entered the room—only to fall down in a faint."

"What made her faint? Have you no suspicion?"

"More than suspicion—certainty," said Leslie, pointing to the phial. "I have no doubt that the man placed that in the room, charged with poisonous gas." And he hurriedly told her how and where he had found the thing.

Marion gazed at him with frightened eyes. "The Americans?" she faltered. "Then, after all, there is danger from them. But what of the girl? What can she have wanted here, for she must have been ignorant of the danger of entering the room? Ah, perhaps this explains it."

A folded paper, overlooked by Leslie in his agitation, lay on the edge of the table close to where the girl lay, suggesting that she had just placed it there when she fell. Taking it up, Marion began to read, but started as if stung by a snake.

"Is this true?" she inquired of her husband in a cold, hard voice—a tone he had never heard her use before.

"I have not seen it," said Leslie. "As I have my hands full, perhaps you will be so good as to read it to me."

Marion glanced at him, a world of questioning doubt fighting with the tenderness in her eyes. Then she read from the paper:—

"Cruel and faithless! I could not let the climax of your treachery pass without letting you know that you have not succeeded in hiding from me. I write this, intending to take any opportunity that may offer of placing it in your hands to-night. It is not likely to touch your hard heart, but if it will add one bitter drop to your cup of happiness I shall be satisfied."

"It does not refer to me. I should have hoped that it was not necessary for me to assure you of that, Marion," said Leslie. But his tone hardly carried conviction, for he was haunted by a dread that the girl would awake out of her swoon and claim him as the man who had wronged and deserted her. He guessed that the accusing paper was meant for Nigel Lukyn, but in this case any protests he might make to the girl that he was not that person would not satisfy Marion. She was too deeply interested, as her heaving bosom and flashing eye testified, to want to keep up what she believed was the fiction of his assumed name and identity for the purpose of deceiving this waif of the night.

The ordeal was evidently at hand, for with short gasps for breath the girl opened her eyes and gazed up into his face, dazed and unseeing. Then a dawning terror was voiced by a cry of recognition, and, shaking herself free of his sustaining arm, the stranger staggered to her feet, still staring at him, fiercely, hungrily. Marion, a superb figure in her shining jewels and low-cut dinner dress, stood watching the pair, scorn and something stronger growing in the curl of her clenched lips. Then, noting that the unknown could scarcely stand, womanly sympathy prevailed, and Marion hastened to give her wine.

With her eyes never off Leslie's face, the girl half finished the glass and set it down wearily on the table. But the stimulant had cleared her brain, and the terror and recognition in her pleading, trustful eyes gave place to an expression of shamefaced guilt. She suddenly looked like a hunted thing, not knowing which way she should turn.

"Oh, what have I done!" she moaned. "This is not—not the gentleman I believed him to be, and wrote that paper for. Oh, but I have made a sad mistake, and may have made mischief, I fear. I only chanced to see you, sir, at a distance outside the church where you were married, and—and I followed you here. But I was wrong—quite wrong. You are not the man who was so unkind to me. Oh, what shall I do."

Marion beamed upon her, with stray scintillations for Leslie. "You shall do whatever you like, my child, except be worried," she said. "You

can sleep here if you choose, and go back to wherever you came from in the morning, or I will have the brougham out and send you to the station. There are several trains more to town to-night."

The girl looked at her gratefully, but shook her head. "If you will just let me drop out and disappear—as though this had never happened—it would be kindest," she said. "I should die of shame if your servants or anyone had to know. It is not far to the station, and I am quite strong enough to walk."

Marion could understand her reluctance to remain, and did not press her. Nor did she yield to a very natural curiosity and ask her name and circumstances. To pry into the tragic little story, upon which the girl's mistake shed such a lurid sidelight, seemed like wanton sacrilege, for hers was evidently a close-hugged sorrow beyond the cure of wordy comfort.

"Go, by all means, if you prefer it," Marion assented kindly. "I suppose that there is nothing that we can do for you? Well, good-night then, and may happier days be in store."

The fragile visitor walked to the window, but turned before passing out into the garden. "May God bless you both," she said earnestly. "I should never forgive myself if I had made mischief. I swear to you, lady, that this gentleman is not the man I thought. I loved the one I knew too well for there to be any mistake."

When she was gone, Leslie carefully closed and fastened the window, and readjusted the curtains, taking advantage of the brief respite while his

back was towards Marion to brace himself to confession. That the Knights of Industry were in deadly earnest in their feud against Lukyn the events of the evening had plainly shown. Ruthless and implacable, they did not seem to mind how many innocent people they injured in bagging their quarry. For him to keep up the delusion that he was Lukyn would be almost as perilous to his wife as to himself.

She could but drive him away with scorn and contumely. Some means could be found for releasing her from that day's marriage contract, and she would be quit for ever of a husband whose proximity entailed the pursuit of uncompromising assassins.

So he turned to abase himself, and was met by a radiant vision with outstretched arms and the love-light in her eyes. In a passion of self-abandonment Marion flung herself upon his breast. Her warm breath was on his face; her lips sought his.

"My darling, my husband," she cried, clinging to him in fond embrace. "To think that I doubted you for a single instant. We will brave these secret dangers together, you and I, with light hearts, dear, since they are no more meant for you than that poor girl's charges were. What a wretch the genuine Leslie Armytage must be to have incurred so much hatred. We must get hold of these Yankees and let them know that—I must whisper it—you are really Nigel Lukyn. Kiss me, my own—not coldly, like that. Ah, that is better. I know now that you have forgiven me, true heart that you are."

So it was that Leslie Armytage, frail flesh and blood that he was for all his stalwart inches, burned his boats and crossed the Rubicon of matrimony under false pretences, but with a sure and certain knowledge that he was loved, as the old-time stories have it, "for himself alone."

And as presently, left to himself, he sat smoking a final cigarette before the dying embers he found some measure of justification. The sins which others would visit upon him, and for which Marion would have condemned him, were not his sins, but those of the man whose place he had taken.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SISTER OF MERCY.

ALONGSIDE one of the quays in the Southampton Docks lay the *Idalia*, the princely steam-yacht which was one of Marion's most cherished possessions. The sluggish haze of vapour that issued from her cream-coloured funnels told that steam was up, and that she was ready for sea as soon as her fair owner and her husband should come on board.

According to a wire received by Captain Crawford, the commander, Mr. and Mrs. Armytage were to be expected by a train due at the Docks Station at six o'clock, having been delayed on their way through London from Maidenhead by some important business.

It was now only four, and Aunt Jare, who had travelled from town earlier in the day, was making herself comfortable before the open-grate fire in the white and gold saloon. A well-furnished tea-table stood at her elbow, and half a dozen society papers, chronicling in terms of more or less pained surprise the bare fact of her niece's marriage to

"a Mr. Armytage," lay on her knee. The editorial mind was clearly vexed that it had not been fed with further details, and with none at all till after the event.

Some few of the journals made veiled allusion to "a previous engagement, necessarily broken off under unfortunate circumstances," but most of them were content to ignore the Lukyn episode and pad out their paragraphs with hackneyed tributes to Marion's beauty and wealth.

Aunt Jane, who was imbued with a fine contempt for society journalism, chuckled as she perused the notices. "They are all savage because they've missed serving up a red-hot sensation," she said to herself. "What would they not give if they could read between the lines of their own meagre news the startling fact that the bridegroom is Nigel Lukyn after all. Strange that nothing seems to have reached the press about his escape from the asylum. If it had, some of these ink-slingers would probably have ferretted out the truth."

It will be remembered that Marion had told her aunt nothing about the scheme she had carried out under Quayne's auspices for freeing her lover, but had simply stated that he had "escaped" from Grey Gables.

The old lady was quite at home on the *Idalia*, having been Marion's companion on many pleasant voyages to the southern seas. As she never suffered from sea-sickness, and the yacht's appointments and service were those of a nobleman's mansion, she always enjoyed the change from the cosy but restricted comfort of the flat in which Marion's

metropolitan tastes had condemned her to spend the greater part of the year.

From Captain Crawford downwards the permanent staff of the yacht, which included all the officers and most of the crew, held the kindly old spinster in warm regard.

It was the captain who, brass-bound cap in hand, now broke in upon her solitude. Captain Crawford was an old servant, a legacy, together with the yacht, from Martin Fermor, the millionaire, to his daughter, and he had fully justified his selection. Originally an officer in the P. and O. service, he had reached the grade of chief mate when a block in promotion had caused him to accept the rich coal owner's salary-doubling offer to command his floating palace. As might be expected from the traditions of his old line, his manners were courtly and his seamanship irreproachable.

"Ah, Captain Crawford, come in and have a cup of tea and help me to pass the time till our young people arrive," said Aunt Jane cheerily, showing by her clutch at the tea-pot that it was no empty invitation.

But the captain politely declined, having had tea in his own cabin. "I want to consult you about a lady who has come on board and desires to see the owner," he said. "As she speaks of Miss Fermor I presume that she has not heard of the marriage. Sister Ursuline, she is her name—connected with some Frenchinery. Would you like to see her?"

"Humph! After a subscription, ...?"

"That's about the size of it, I expect, though she would not state her business to me," said Captain Crawford, smiling. "If she's cadging I'm not sorry that she spared me, for she is an insinuating young person. When I told her that there was a member of the family on board she insisted that I should at least apprise you of her call."

"Very well, I'll see the hussy, though I can't promise to help her," replied Aunt Jane, who often acted as almoner for Marion. "And—one moment, Captain—who was that boy who brought in my tea things? His face seems familiar, though I don't remember him on the yacht."

"He's signed on under the name of Badger," was Captain Crawford's reply. "Very likely you have seen him in London, for he came down this morning with a special note from Mrs. Armytage instructing the head steward to take him on. He seems a handy little shaver."

But Aunt Jane had never heard the name, and had so seldom used the lift at Grandison Mansions that she failed to connect the new pantry boy with the lad who for a short time had acted as elevator attendant. Neither could she know that Badger had been delegated by Mr. Quayne, at Marion's request and at short notice, to keep an open eye for the Knights of Industry. Marion had not even told her husband that she had recourse to the detective as a result of the murderous attempt at Eyot Cottage, and that her request had been met by the despatch of the precocious youth who alone of Quayne's staff knew all three American accomplices by sight. In doing so Marion

had unconsciously created a new predicament for Leslie, who would shortly be confronted by the boy who had fetched him into her presence from the Strand, yet who was believed by her never to have set eyes on her husband.

Dismissing the, to her, immaterial subject of the new assistant steward, Aunt Jane composed herself to receive the importunate Sister of Mercy. Hampered by her unwieldy garments the woman made but slow progress down the saloon, but when she at length arrived in the old lady's neighbourhood she made up for the delay by the volubility of her discourse. In a flood of broken English, she pleaded for "a vare 'ansome donation" for the Carmelite nuns settled in the Isle of Wight.

"How do you like being a nun?" asked Aunt Jane pointedly, after taking stock of the small portion of human countenance visible in the midst of its cumbrous swathings. The complexion was fresh and healthy, but the eyes struck Aunt Jane as not at all what should be looked for in a *religieuse*, and distinctly sly. They had been here, there, and everywhere in a swift scrutiny of the luxurious saloon, but, recalled by the sharp interrogation, they settled on the questioner's face.

"Why you ask that?" she demanded with a curiosity that was clearly genuine.

"Because, my dear Sister, you look from the little you show of yourself as if you were not quite of the convent type," was Aunt Jane's somewhat personal reply. "A pretty face enough, I dare say, but just a trifle worldly, eh?"

The visitor hastily crossed herself and staggered back, her beaded crucifix rattling, on to the settee that ran all round the saloon. For an instant she seemed about to faint, but in about ten seconds she stood erect again.

"You t'ink I impostare," she gurgled. "One great t'ief, that what you t'ink. Ah, madame, but you are cruel to one who does not collect money for herself, but by order of the Superieure. And I had believe that this ship was of a lady so reech and so generous."

"So she is," replied Aunt Jane, relenting at praise of Marion. "But I don't happen to be her, you see. I can act as her deputy so far as offering you a couple of sovereigns. I am not authorised to dispense larger sums."

The Sister raised her hands in protest. "But, madame, I am not humble beggar like that," she cried, laughing contemptuously. "I had thought to go with a cheque for t'ousan' pound—one 'ondred anyhow. The lady is so vare, vare reech, I 'ear."

"Well, she will be on board in a couple of hours. As you are a person of such large ideas you had better wait—*on deck*," said Aunt Jane with a frigid emphasis.

"But that is not of the most convenient—to wait two hours. I will write and put my case to her if you will kindly give address where this beautiful ship is to stop."

"You can write to Mrs. Armytage at Gibraltar if you like. We are going to the Mediterranean, and shall probably call there for letters, but my

niece isn't a fool, any more than she is a niggard, and I expect you'll have to whistle for a three figure cheque," said Aunt Jane, who, accustomed as she was to the assaults of charity-seekers, had never encountered one of such barefaced impudence.

But Sister Ursuline ignored the rebuff and gathered her unwieldy garments for departure with the air of a purpose achieved. "The reech lady s'all 'ave the letter, and to yourself, madame, a t'ousand *remerciments*."

With which she lumbered down the saloon towards the door, and just inside it was met by Badger, resplendent in the brand new page's livery served out to him from the ship's stores. He respectfully stood aside for the cumbrous figure to pass, and in so doing incidentally lowered his head. The nun having left the saloon, he went on to remove Aunt Jane's tea equipage, but having packed the tray he darted to the settee on which Sister Ursuline had sat down and peered underneath it. His action caught the eye of the old lady, who had returned to the perusal of her society papers.

"What are you doing there, boy?" she inquired.

"Thought I saw a black-beetle, m'am, but I was mistook," was the ready answer, and whisking up the tray Badger left the saloon in time, on his way to the pantry, to witness the nun's figure receding along the quay in the direction of the dock gates.

The boy gazed after her, his brow knitted.

"Now what can have been her game, I wonder," he muttered. "I'd bet sixpence she tried to shove something under that settee, but there wasn't anything there. Maybe she spotted me watching her from the doorway, and thought better of it."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LURK ON THE QUAY.

It was with a deep sense of humiliation that Leslie Armytage led Marion across the gangway of the *Idalia* and saw the affectionate regard in which she was held by the crew of the magnificent vessel. A young queen could not have been accorded a greeting more spontaneous and respectfully cordial. When Marion introduced him to Crawford and the officers, and an equally warm welcome was extended to him, Leslie's impulse was there and then to proclaim himself an impostor.

Singularly enough it had been reserved till that moment for him to realise the material benefits he was gaining by his personation of Nigel Lukyn. Everything in his conduct and in his emotions had hitherto been swayed by the passionate love, almost amounting to worship, which he had conceived for the woman at his side—a love now hallowed by the holiest of ties, and he knew as surely as that the sun would rise on the morrow, *reciprocated*. But these brass-capped officers ;

these grinning, scraping bluejackets; the palatial steamer—all the moneyed splendour of it brought home to him that by what the world would call a trick he had jumped from the amenities of the Rowton House into the status of a millionaire.

Yet to cry shame on himself was to cry shame on Marion, and he choked down the torrent of words that would have plunged her into ridicule even greater than his own obloquy.

"Miss Middleton is waiting for you in the shelter," Captain Crawford announced. "The evening is chilly, and she preferred to remain under saloon."

"Dear Aunt Jane, that is the right place for her," replied Marion, and with smiles and nods for everyone she hastened to the saloon, which, with the principal cabins and state-rooms, was on the upper deck. Leslie followed, and behind him came the maid Crispin, laden with rugs and handbags. The door of the saloon was adroitly opened by Badger, who, as Marion passed, contrived to whisper—

"Mrs. Molyneux been here—dressed like a nun—seen the old lady."

Marion blanched at this early sign of menace from those whom she believed to be seeking her husband's life, but mastering her dismay, she passed on with a nod, as though at some unimportant communication. She did not wish Leslie to know that she had invoked Quayne's aid to protect him, and being under the delusion that he was Nigel Lukyn she saw no reason in Badger's presence on board to give her secret away. As

a matter of fact, Leslie guessed it the moment he set eyes on the boy who had run out from Quayne's office to bring him in, and the course his wife had taken added greatly to his inclination to confess. With the celebrated detective imported into the case once more, it was not likely that he would be able to keep up the deception for long, even if he wished to do so. He glanced apprehensively at Badger, to see if he was going to distinguish him from the "double," but the boy's face was a mask of vacuity. Badger modelled himself on his master in the art of controlling his features, and showed no trace of the surprise he felt that the husband of his divinity should be the "broken-down toff" he had extracted from the Strand traffic.

For the existence of a "double" was not known to Badger, or indeed anything of the business which had originally brought Marion to seek Quayne's services. That astute practitioner did not make unnecessary confidences, and the only instructions given to the youngster were to report to Mrs. Armytage if he saw "Mrs. Molyneux" or either of her male associates on board the yacht or at any port she might touch at. Quayne had also hinted that if any of the Americans did put in an appearance it would be as well to watch their movements closely.

Aunt Jane welcomed the bride and bridegroom with whimsical reproaches for leaving her in charge of the yacht for so long. She had been subjected to all sorts of annoyances and responsibilities, with which she had hoped to have finished for

ever—now that there was a man to see to things.

"You dear old grumbler," laughed Marion, kissing her. "You have been entertaining a nun, I hear. Did she come to try to proseletise you, or to collect subscriptions?"

"Subscriptions!" snorted Aunt Jane, and she broke into a vehement denunciation of the applicant's avaricious demands, concluding with Sister Ursuline's intention to put her plea in writing and send it to Gibraltar.

"She asked you where the yacht was to call, and you told her, I suppose," said Marion, after a moment's pause. "Ah, well, the importunate lady will have to wait a long time for an answer, for we are not going to Gibraltar at all. I have changed my mind about going south. We might find the Bay of Biscay in an angry mood at this time of year, and I think it would be much jollier, and safer, to stick to English waters. We'll just cruise from port to port, making our own sunshine as we go along, and taking—let's see—Exmouth as our first stop. You don't mind, dear, do you?"

Leslie, to whom the question was addressed, raised no objection. In fact, with his growing determination to confess his imposture, the change of plan rather suited him than otherwise. If Marion decided to have done with him she would not have to wait days before she was quit of his presence. She could merely leave him stranded at the place where he could screw his courage to the sticking point.

"That's settled then!" Marion cried with a relief that struck Leslie as greater than the occasion demanded. "It will be time enough to tell Captain Crawford of our change of route presently—after we have sailed. But I must send off a telegram to London—to my man of business—about it."

She sat down at a writing-table and began to cover a telegraph form with hastily pencilled words, but was interrupted by Crispin, who had followed into the saloon to deposit her load of travelling *impedimenta*, but had stood in the background unheeded during the parley with Aunt Jane.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but will there be time before the yacht starts for me to run back to the Docks Station?" said the maid in a tone of suppressed agitation. "I have your things all right, but I left my own bag in the railway carriage. I don't know how I shall be able to do without it."

"Oh, run back by all means," replied Marion without looking up, but covering her half-finished telegram with blotting-paper. "We shall not start till my messenger has been to the office with this."

"I might save trouble by taking it myself, as I am going ashore," Crispin suggested in the manner of the good servant who spares no pains to please.

Marion at this half turned in her chair and looked the maid steadily in the face. Crispin bore the scrutiny without wincing or so much

as the quiver of an eyelash, though it did not escape her mistress that her teeth were tightly clenched over her lower lip.

"No," said Marion, turning to the table with a gesture of impatience, "I intend to send one of the yacht's people with the telegram."

Crispin bowed and left the saloon, showing no sign that she was conscious of a rebuff till she was out on deck, when she turned a glance full of baffled malice towards the door she had just quitted. Then she crossed the gangway on to the quay and made her way quickly to the Docks Station, where, after procuring her bag from a porter in whose charge she had left it, she entered the first-class waiting-room. Only three people were enjoying its comparative seclusion—a lady in a smart tailor gown and a couple of well-groomed gentlemen. They ceased their conversation at the maid's entrance and beckoned her eagerly to their corner.

"It's a good job I prepared an excuse for coming ashore," Crispin began in lowered voice. "I can give you a bit of real news—the yacht's destination."

Berthe Roumier laughed mockingly. "But I got that myself this afternoon, out of the old party with the expensive cap," she said.

It was Crispin's turn to look superior, as she announced that the *Idalia* was not going to the Mediterranean, but would cruise round the English coast, making Exmouth her first port of call.

"She made the change after Miss Middleton told her about your coming on board as a nun,"

Crispin added. "And there's another thing. My lady knows more than you think, and I can put my finger on her source of inspiration. There's a new steward's boy—the same keen little ferret who was lift-boy for a week at the Mansions after you came to live there."

The accomplices looked from one to the other, and Scorrier Voules emitted a low whistle. "Then they must have taken on the unknown detective again," he murmured, "and the boy is the shadow—or one of them."

Berthe Roumier's smooth brow was puckered in a frown. "You are right," she said. "The boy is undoubtedly the shadow. He was watching me when—when I was trying to leave a *souvenir* of my visit on board to-day. I half recognised his face, but could not place it. He is only a pawn in the game, however. If we could discover who is employing him it would be a step in advance."

"I can put you on to that," interjected Crispin eagerly. "She's been writing a telegram which she wouldn't let me bring ashore. It is sure to be to the boy's master, and the boy is sure to be sent with it to the office. If you look sharp there may be time enough yet to stop him and make him show you the form. It's none too well lighted on the quay, where the yacht lies."

Berthe Roumier's beautiful white teeth closed with a snap. "The very thing," she exclaimed. "But too many of us mustn't show up. Fayter, as this project is of the brusque and possibly brutal order it naturally falls under your department. Out with you, and waylay the boy. As for you,

Miss Crispin, the labourer is worthy of her hire. Here is a twenty-pound note for you—as an earnest of the large reward you will reap when we have finished our work."

"I wish you would tell me what that work is," said the maid doubtfully, as she pocketed the note. "I don't hold with people having so many pretty dresses and things as my mistress, but I shouldn't like to be mixed up in anything—anything serious. I've served you well with information, since you first spoke to me at the Mansions."

"Since I first squared you at Grandison Mansions to keep me posted in your mistress's movements," Berthe Roumier corrected her. "No, Miss Crispin, we pay our tools well, but we don't talk to them. You had better get back to the yacht, and if you see Mr. Frayne engaged in exercising a gentle pressure on the boy you had better look the other way. You will probably reach Exmouth tomorrow, and the post-office there, with the usual names, will be our means of communication for appointing a rendezvous if we wish to see you."

With which scant enlightenment Crispin had to be content, and so started to make her way back to the yacht.

In the meanwhile Marion had long ago finished writing her telegram, but for reasons of her own—reasons due to a dawning suspicion of her maid—she delayed its despatch till Crispin should have returned on board. So it was that only after the first dinner gong had sounded, when the treacherous abigail was busy in her mistress's

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state-room, did Badger receive the form from Marion's own hands.

It was headed to "Omniscient, London," which was Quayne's telegraphic address, and ran as follows :—

"They have been here and learned destination. Have changed plans to throw them off scent. Sailing first for Exmouth."

With the flimsy paper tight clutched Badger sped along the quay, which was well nigh deserted at that hour, and quickly neared the spot where Fayter Frayne was lying in wait for him in the shadow of a baggage shed. The truculent little American meant to stand no nonsense. He would have a sight of that telegraph form, even if he had to throttle the boy into silence. He had left the cover of the shed, and was advancing to meet his prey, when a strange thing happened.

Badger had just passed the corner of the next shed to that where Frayne had been hiding, when round it there appeared a tall man wearing a long overcoat and a deerstalker cap pulled low over his eyes. In half a dozen swift strides the newcomer overtook the boy, and, walking at his side, made it impossible for Frayne to carry out his purpose. There was no course open to the American but to walk past the pair with as unconcerned an air as he could assume, trying in the darkness, but without success, to get a glimpse of the tall man's face.

Berthe Roumier or Scorrier Voules, with their

readiness of resource, might have been equal to the emergency, and *finesse* would have been substituted for the now impracticable assault. But Frayne could do nothing but curse his luck, and, in passing, strive to catch a fragment of the conversation between man and boy.

All that he managed to hear was the exclamation in Badger's piping treble: "If she said so, sir, of course it's all right."

But if Frayne had heard the prelude to and the sequel of that unconvincing remark he would have been considerably astonished, for he had had a clear view of the brilliantly-lit yacht from his place of concealment, and he knew that no one but the boy had crossed the gangway on to the quay.

"Stop a minute, youngster," the tall man had said on overtaking Badger. "I want to see if there's a mistake in that."

Badger, half wheeling round, and peering up under the close-drawn deerstalker, recognised, or thought he did, the "broken-down toff" whom he had been sent by Marion to fetch into Quayne's office, and at whose welcome as her husband on board the *Idalia* he had just been present. But he had been given to understand that Mr. Armytage was not to be told of Quayne's re-instatement, and, though he believed the evidence of his eyes, caution prompted him to ask—

"Did the lady send you after me?"

"Yes," was the reply in the voice Badger thought he knew, "she said I was to have a look at it."

It was then that Badger had made the answer

which alone of all this had reached Frayne's ears :
"If she said so, sir, of course it's all right."

And without more ado the boy handed over the telegraph form, which the tall man carried to the next electric arc and perused with interest.

"Thanks," he said, handing it back again.
"There is no need for correction." And he turned on his heel and walked rapidly back, as though returning to the yacht.

Seeing that Badger was now without the temporary protection of a companion, Frayne, as soon as the striding figure had passed him, started to retrace his steps ; but Marion's young messenger, anxious to make up for lost time, began to run at top speed, and so fleet of foot was he that he was at the dock gates and out in the well-lit, crowded thoroughfare before the American could overtake him. And Badger, whose bright intelligence had soon discovered that he was being chased, found it child's play to elude his pursuer amid the throng on the side-walk. He had got the telegram handed in, and was back on the yacht, past the danger zone of the deserted quay, before it occurred to Frayne to try and intercept him on his return.

Badger, gallant little sportsman as he was, had thoroughly enjoyed an adventure which bespoke the activity of his adversaries. He had recognised Frayne as one of "Mrs. Molyneux's" frequent visitors at the Mansions, just as he had recognised the bogus nun as "Mrs. Molyneux" herself, and he was proud to be assisting in a case which bade fair to advance him in the profession.

But the good opinion he was forming of his own importance received a rude shock almost in the moment of his going aboard. Finding that dinner had been served in his absence, he went straight to the saloon to assist his nominal chief, the head steward. Marion was in evening dress, as she had been when she had come out of her state-room to hand him the telegram. But what, in his own phrase, knocked him silly was that Leslie Armytage also wore evening dress, with no traces of hasty dressing, though they had finished the soup and were half way through the fish. So quick had Badger been over his mission that Leslie could not possibly have changed his things since he appeared to run after him to verify the telegram.

Yet the man to whom Badger had conceded that privilege had certainly not been in the conventional attire of the evening. Quayne's youthful understudy had not omitted to observe that the trousers visible below his long overcoat were of tweed—of the same description as those worn by Leslie when he arrived on the yacht. Indeed the trousers, taken in conjunction with face and voice, had been an important factor in persuading Badger that he was dealing with Mr. Armytage.

"I've been and given the show away," the lad reflected in a chastened spirit as he went and busied himself at the sideboard. "But who could the chap have been? I'll take my oath it wasn't one of the three I'm here to shadow."

Badger decided that it would be best to say nothing about his possible blunder, at any rate for the present, but to keep his eyes open for the

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means to rectify it. The not unnatural impression that he formed was that the man who had accosted him was a hitherto quiescent colleague of the trio of Americans, made up to resemble Mrs. Armytage's husband.

"*He* don't look too easy in h's mind either," said the Cockney urchin to himself as he advanced on Leslie with an *entrée* dish. "She'd have done better for herself it she'd stayed sitting in the governor's front room, staring out of window and talking to me about Granny and Sister Sue."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FOOL'S PARADISE.

THE *Idalia's* voyage having degenerated into a coasting trip, as a result of the nun's visit and Aunt Jane's guileless disclosures, departure was postponed till the following morning. It was, therefore, late in the afternoon when the graceful steam-yacht crossed the bar at the mouth of the Exe and anchored in the broad estuary under the lee of the Haldon Hills.

The short passage down Channel on an ideal winter's day had been delightful to Marion, for she was in the mood to live entirely in the present, and her belief that the American confederates had been dispatched on a wild-goose chase to the Mediterranean set her free from all anxiety. Badger, while preserving silence about the man to whom he had shown the telegraph form, had duly acted on the letter of his instructions and had reported to her his pursuit by Frayne. But Marion was not worried by the incident, deeming that the mysterious three would naturally hang about on the look-out for chances till the yacht

left Southampton, but that they would then leave for Gibraltar, and that nothing was to be apprehended from them at the Devonshire port.

Leslie also, under the glamour of the honeymoon, was inclined to take advantage of the reprieve from the vendetta he had inherited with Lukyn's personality, and to let matters drift for the present. Every day that he postponed his confession strengthened the bonds between his wife and himself, and he hugged to himself the hope that after all he might be forgiven. Yet for to-day and to-morrow and several days he would preserve his secret unless something happened to force his hand, such a moral coward had his dread of losing Marion's love made of him.

On one point he saw no reason why there should be a false position between Marion and himself, and as they strolled on deck together he took steps to remove it. The *Idalia* was gliding past the rugged peninsula of Portland at the time, and Leslie pointed to the grim convict prison perched on the summit.

"I wonder how many poor wretches your friend Quayne has been instrumental in sending there," he said.

Marion halted, and, laying her sealskin glove on his arm, looked up into his face with mock solemnity.

"You are getting far too clever, sir," she said. "You are introducing Quayne's name with a purpose. You want to lead me on to talk about him."

"I cannot deny the impeachment," Leslie admitted.

"Ah, I see," said Marion. "You have recognised Badger. But, no," she corrected herself, "it can't be that, as you never saw him till last night. I am always forgetting that you are not the real Leslie Armytage—the poor fellow who is enacting the sorry part of Nigel Lukyn at Doctor Beaman's lunatic asylum. Why do you want to talk about Quayne, dear?"

Leslie's heart fluttered at the half wistful reference to himself—his real self. "Only," he answered, "because I think you have taken him on again, and we may as well enjoy the excitement of it together."

"How did you find it out?" asked Marion breathlessly.

"It would hardly take a John Quayne to do it," Leslie smiled down at her. "One of my relentless enemies is known to be an artful woman, at least so Quayne told us at Broadstairs. Aunt Jane is visited by a preposterous nun, whose obvious mission is to discover the destination of the yacht, and hearing that the dear old lady has yielded up the information you immediately cancel the Mediterranean cruise. What else was one to think but that you had good reason for suspecting the nun, and how else could you have gained your suspicion but by Quayne's agency?"

Marion laughed gaily, and, drawing her arm through her husband's, resumed their promenade. "Well, now that you put it so plainly I wonder that I ever expected to keep it from you," she said. "Yes, dear; after that weird experience at Eyot Cottage I wired to Quayne next morning to send

someone to the yacht who could warn me if the Americans turned up, and he sent the new steward's boy—Badger. He's a charming little person—a sort of miniature detective, who amused me much through those dreary months when I sat at his master's window, searching for your counterpart."

And Marion ended with a sigh so deep that Leslie asked the reason.

"I was thinking," she said, "what a pity it is that Mr. Armytage—the real Mr. Armytage, you know—turns out to have been such a bad lot. He seemed so very, very nice, and yet that poor girl who came to Maidenhead on the day of our wedding, mistaking you for him, showed what a heartless person he must be."

Leslie longed to defend himself against the charge which he felt assured should rightfully be brought against his "double," or at any rate not against himself. He even opened his mouth to assert that any infamy in respect of the girl should be attached to the name of Lukyn, and not of Armytage. But he pulled himself up short, remembering that as Marion believed him to be Nigel Lukyn that would be to state a self-accusation which he would only be able to refute by making a clean breast of his imposture.

And looking down at his wife's sweet face, all flushed with indignation for the wrongs of that poor unknown, he could not nerve himself to confession just then. If she could be so angry at the ill-treatment of a stranger, he shuddered to think of how she would receive his deception of herself.

He turned the subject back to Badger's fortunate recognition of the bogus nun, which had enabled Marion to throw the Americans off the scent for a while.

"Yes, dear," she said, squeezing his arm, "there is no fear of your being made a scapegoat for that other's misdeeds for a considerable time. Made-moiselle Roumier and Company will probably cool their heels at 'Gib.' for a week or two, in the expectation that the yacht will turn up, before they return to England."

She did not add that there was one little doubt in her mind as to whether her alteration of the yacht's cruise had really been effective—a doubt based on the dawning distrust of Crispin, which had prevented her from letting the maid take the telegram to the office at Southampton, and which had arisen not only from Crispin's veiled eagerness to be the messenger, but from the fact that *someone* inside the house must have left the curtained window at Eyot Cottage unbolted on the night when the deadly phial had been introduced.

If Crispin was a traitor, Marion argued, she might, though she had failed to see the telegram to Quayne, have informed the conspirators of the changed destination of the yacht. She had been in the saloon when the change had been mooted. There was evidence, from Badger's chase by Frayne, that they had not cleared off altogether after Aunt Jane's disclosure of the programme, and Crispin might have communicated with Frayne on the quay. In which case trouble might be anticipated at Exmouth.

Marion, for reasons of her own, kept the little doubt to herself, for if any more intrusive nuns or obvious schemers tried to board the yacht she had shaped her plans, and the latter might not meet with her husband's approval. She was by no means convinced, either, of Crispin's treachery, and if she was mistaken in it she would have disturbed the happiness of the honeymoon to no purpose by inspiring ungrounded alarm. After all, the chances that the mysterious trio would appear at Exmouth were infinitesimal, and in the halcyon calm of present security she endeavoured to ignore them.

So during the short winter day the newly-married pair thrust their several anxieties into the background and lived only for the present, content with each other, and therefore with all the world besides. By the time the *Idalia* reached her anchorage off the pretty Devon town Leslie had quite completed his conquest of Aunt Jane.

"My dear Marion, whatever has happened to that spouse of yours I cannot imagine," the old lady confided to her niece when Leslie had left them alone in the saloon after tea. "I was never more mistaken in a first impression in my life. He must have been shy, or else his liver must have been out of order that day when you brought him to the flat in the summer. I thought him arrogant and bad-tempered, but he has turned out positively delightful. A man who can be as nice to an ugly old woman as he is to me is all too rare."

Marion, without admitting that there had been any fault to find with her husband on his first

introduction to Aunt Jane, agreed that he was a "perfect darling" now. But in her heart of hearts she knew that Aunt Jane's verdict was right, and that the man she adored to-day was a vast improvement on what he was when his own mother consigned him to Doctor Beaman's care. The thought came over her that he might have suffered some temporary mental disturbance which skilled treatment had effectually cured.

The foreboding that he might ever have a relapse she put from her as an inspiration of the Evil One, not to be entertained for an instant. He was a mate to be proud of and to be thankful for, she told herself, and to regard him in any other light would be an outrage to her own common-sense. Besides, she loved him, and that was enough for her.

It was quite dark when the *Idalia* swung to her anchor in the tidal estuary, a quarter of a mile from the twinkling lamps on Exmouth Esplanade. There was to be no communication between the yacht and the shore that night, but as Crispin was waiting on her mistress in the state-room before dinner she inquired with her customary demure respect whether she would have an opportunity of going into the town in the morning.

"There are one or two small things I want to buy for my own use," she explained.

"Run out of hair-curlers, eh, Crispin?" Marion replied pleasantly, but with an odd ring in her voice. "Oh, yes, I will see that you get a chance to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIX.

BADGER *versus* CRISPIN.

AFTER breakfast next morning Marion, who had been on the watch, ran Badger to ground as he was dusting the cabin known as "the ladies' boudoir." She had ascertained that Leslie was on the bridge, smoking an early cigar with Captain Crawford, and that Crispin was having her own breakfast with the head steward and the *chef*. Aunt Jane was toasting her toes before the fire in the main saloon.

She had been careful to fix these dispositions before approaching her youthful ally, because she had a plan in her head, which, if her suspicions were correct, would free her husband and herself once for all from the attentions of the mysterious Americans.

"Well, Billy, do you feel particularly spry to-day?" she asked.

Badger, thirsting to atone for what he considered his blunder at Southampton, eagerly affirmed that he was.

"Then there will be a chance for you to distin-

guish yourself presently," Marion continued. "My maid, Crispin, is going ashore, and I want you to shadow her closely. I think it possible that she may meet one of the persons you know of, but still more probable that she will call at the post-office for letters. If she does, do you think you could get any letter or letters she may receive away from her before she has read them, and bring them to me?"

"I could have a jolly good try," responded Badger hopefully. "But I ought not to go ashore in the same boat with her. I rather reckon that she tumbles to me as the chap that worked the lift at the Mansions. I've caught her looking at me curious and sort of spiteful."

"You're a born detective, Billy Badger," said Marion warmly, emphasising her genuine admiration for the boy's smartness in order to stimulate his enthusiasm. "I will see that you go ashore separately. The head steward will land in one of the boats for fresh vegetables, and Crispin will go with him. After they have gone, I shall remember that I specially want some forced strawberries, and I'll send you after them in the motor-launch. Then your ingenuity will have to do the rest."

"That won't do," Badger firmly replied. "If she lands first I mightn't catch her up in time. Can't I go at once—now, while she's at breakfast?"

Marion saw the force of the suggestion, and at once adopted it. Sending the boy for the second officer, one of whose duties it was to attend to the launch, she ordered him to take Badger ashore in it forthwith.

"And, Mr. Saunders," she added as an afterthought, "the boy is going on a confidential mission for me. He understands what my object is, so if he asks you to do anything—anything in reason, of course, but a little unusual—you will do it, won't you?"

The second officer, devoted like all the *Idalia's* crew to their kindly young owner, would have looted the Crown jewels at her bidding. He at once gave the required assurance, and the launch was throbbing towards the shore long before Crispin had finished breakfast. Badger sat thoughtfully in the stern, and not till he was about to spring onto the landing-place did he address Saunders.

"The blooming boat'll start as soon as you push the button, won't it, sir?" he asked. "That's a bit of all right, then. You heard what she said. When I come back I shall probably be in a hurry, and it'll serve her if you start as soon as I'm aboard—no matter who's after me."

"'Twon't be the police, I hope, sonny?" grinned the officer.

"Might be," was the boy's disconcerting reply. "But more likely an angry woman."

With which he made off into the town, and, having discovered the post-office, proceeded to put into practice the first of the two schemes he had formed for obtaining possession of Crispin's correspondence. It was the simple one of asking whether there were any letters for a person of that name. There were none.

"'Twasn't likely she'd use her own name," reflected Badger as he turned away from the counter,

to no great extent disappointed. Boy-like, he had a greater faith in the second string to his bow—for the sufficient reason that it might entail a little sport.

Mindful that he was also charged to report if Crispin communicated personally with the Americans, he hurried back to the landing-place so as to be in time to shadow her into the town. Keeping out of sight of Mr. Saunders in the motor-launch, idly tossing at the steps, he gazed across to the *Idalia*, and saw that one of her row-boats was just leaving the yacht's side. He had cut it rather fine, for inside ten minutes the boat was at the steps and the head steward was gallantly helping the lady's maid ashore.

Badger shadowed the pair through the mean streets that lie between the river front and the centre of the town, and just as he was beginning to fear that he should have a fleet-footed man to deal with instead of a tight-laced female, he had the satisfaction of seeing the steward politely raise his cap and, laden with his baskets, go off towards the shops in Fore Street. Crispin dawdled about, looking into windows till the steward was out of sight, and then darted into the post-office.

Badger did not follow her into the building, but stationed himself outside the swing doors in such a position that she would not see him as long as she was within. Every nerve in him was tingling, but he contrived to assume an attitude that attracted no attention from passers-by.

Marion's instructions had been to get the letter or letters, if possible, before they had been read by the recipient, and that was the point that was

worrying Badger. He would back himself to get the letter from the maid, but to get it unread was a different matter. He did not like to leave it to chance, yet he could devise no other way. The fear of a miscarriage made him bold. He risked being seen, and peered through the glass doors. The clerk had just handed Crispin a letter, which she was in the act of tearing open.

Then it was that Badger's resourcefulness came into play. Passing him on the pavement was a shambling, blear-eyed old man in rags. Badger knew the type well. There were plenty like that in the Harleyford Road, Lambeth. The boy fished out twopence and thrust the coppers into the loafer's hand.

"Earn it, old 'un," he whispered. "Go inside and tell the lady at the counter that Mrs. Molyneux—*Mrs. Molyneux*, no error, mind—wants to see her this instant minute."

The bibulous tramp spat upon his treasure-trove and passed into the post-office. Badger waited round the corner, his heart thumping nineteen to the dozen. Yes, the job had come off. Crispin, with the half-opened letter in her hand, came out onto the steps, looking about her eagerly—anywhere but at the letter, which Badger promptly snatched from the well-gloved fingers. In a second he was off like the wind for the landing-place.

The chase which ensued ended almost as soon as it began, without justifying Badger's prediction that he would return to the motor-launch pursued by an angry woman. Crispin's natural cunning came to her assistance, and caused her to stop in

six paces after her first involuntary rush. To show anxiety to re-possess herself of the letter would be equivalent to a plea of guilty, if, as she shrewdly guessed, it had been so adroitly purloined at the instance of her mistress. It was not addressed to her in her own name, and her correspondents were not the sort of people to have put anything compromising inside. The wisest plan would be to treat the matter as a rude boy's joke, and, if Marion spoke to her about it, disclaim ownership of the letter.

She would say that it had been handed to her in error by the clerk, and that she had been about to return it when it was snatched from her. But though there was nothing compromising in the letter which Marion read in the seclusion of her state-room twenty minutes later, there was that in it which gave her supreme satisfaction.

The contents were simply—

"47, Holroyd Street. As soon as possible, please."

When Crispin came on board in the head-steward's boat, trying not to look crestfallen, Marion said nothing to her about the letter, leaving her in doubt whether Badger had not purloined it on his own account. But Marion dropped a hint to Captain Crawford that on no consideration whatever was her maid to be allowed to land while the yacht remained at Exmouth.

"That is an appointment which I shall keep in person," she assured herself. "The visit of Miss Crispin's substitute will be something of a surprise to Mademoiselle Roumier and her friends, I expect."

CHAPTER XX.

CROSS PURPOSES.

AFTER lunch Marion informed Leslie that she had a few purchases to make in the town, and that she proposed to take the motor-launch and go ashore for an hour or two.

"It would do me good to stretch my legs too," replied Leslie. They were walking on the hurricane deck, which was virtually the roof of the saloon and the other deck cabins. The only higher structure on the yacht was the bridge, at present unoccupied. The sun was already slanting to the West over the Haldon hills, but it was still high enough to bathe the pretty watering-place at the river's mouth in an alluring glow.

Marion cast a glance at the vacant bridge, and then indulged in the wifely trick, dating back four days only, but already becoming a habit, of squeezing her husband's arm.

"I think it would be safer and wiser not, dear," she said when she was satisfied that there were no possible listeners. "Our misled American pursuers are probably in a French train on their way to

Gibraltar, but one never knows. I should feel happier if you remained on board."

"But if there is the slightest chance of these Yankees cropping up, you mustn't think of going ashore yourself," said Leslie.

"At any rate there isn't the slightest chance of their doing me any harm," was Marion's reply. The evasiveness of it was lost upon Leslie at the time. "They have no grudge against me," she added, "and the fact remains—you will make me miserable if you insist on coming, and you will make me more than happy if you stay and do the civil to Aunt Jane while I buy a few things. Now, be a good boy, won't you?"

What was he to do but to yield—this husband-lover of a few-days-old honeymoon? After all, what she had said was perfectly true—that whoever was the object of the Americans' vengeance it could not be herself. Besides, in his ignorance of Crispin's proved untrustworthiness, he shared his wife's professed view that the persistent trio were by this time flying across the continent of Europe on a false scent. There could be no danger to himself, and still less to her on shore; but as she made such a point of it he consented to remain on board.

So it was that Marion descended to her state-room and was arrayed for the expedition by the sullen and furtively-curious Crispin. The maid was at her wits' end for an excuse for asking to accompany her, but she could frame none that seemed adequate. The traitress was consumed with a desire to learn if Badger had given the letter to Marion, but the

latter's manner afforded no clue. There was nothing to show that Crispin's valued situation was in danger. Her mistress treated her just as usual, except that she seemed somewhat preoccupied.

Marion, also, was consumed with an overwhelming desire, which, however, was easier of realisation. It was neither more nor less than to confront as speedily as possible the deadly three who, she feared, intended to dog their steps till they had succeeded in robbing her of her husband. That the letter she had procured by Badger's assistance contained their address, and an order to their spy to meet them there, she had little doubt.

The motor-launch in charge of the second officer bore her swiftly to the landing-stage.

"You had better not wait for me, Mr. Saunders," she said. - "I may be a little time among the shops. Come back in an hour to fetch me."

She watched the tiny craft wheel from the steps and cleave the smooth waters towards the yacht, at which she waved her hand in the hope that her husband would see. Then she turned away and inquired of the nearest longshore loafer the way to Holroyd Street.

The thoroughfare in question proved to be at no great distance—one of several rows of third-rate lodging-houses hidden inconspicuously behind the more fashionable streets and crescents. Number 47 was in no way distinguishable from the drab mediocrity of the other precisely similar houses on either side of the road. As she touched the cheap electric bell-push, Marion thought that, but for a faint smell of the sea, Holroyd Street, Ex-

mouth, might very well be at Clapham Junction or Ball's Pond.

A tawdry young woman, evidently the daughter of the house, appeared after some delay and eyed her with considerable disfavour. From this Marion argued that the "apartments" were full.

"You have a lady from London staying here, I think?" she said tentatively. Instinct told her that such a pre-eminently "proper" person as her treacherous maid would not go to meet the male conspirators alone. Crispin might be avaricious, ambitious and double-faced, but she was of the smug order that respects the outward proprieties.

"Yes, there's a lady here—Mrs. Molyneux," replied the janitor. "She's got a gentleman visitor with her, but if you'll send in your name I'll ask if she'll see you. I know she's expecting someone."

"Miss Ruby Lennox," said Marion promptly, giving the name on the envelope of the letter which Badger had captured from Crispin.

The untidy young person vanished into the house, but returned immediately with an invitation to enter.

Marion followed down a narrow passage to the back of the house, where her conductress opened a door on the left, announced her by Crispin's pseudonym and departed, leaving her in the presence of Berthe Roumier and Scorrier Voules. The well-schooled features of the pair evinced none of the surprise they must have felt at the entrance of the mistress instead of the maid, but a scarcely perceptible signal flashed from Berthe Roumier's fine eyes. At its bidding Voules, without any fuss

or show of intention, lounged across the room to a position whence he could put himself between Marion and the door.

She was too intent on her purpose to perceive that her retreat was threatened. "So you see it is not Miss Ruby Lennox, or rather my maid Crispin" she began with a nervous laugh to cover her eagerness. "I have come, quite in a friendly way, to point out to you a very great mistake that you are making—one that I am sure you would greatly regret if you carried it too far."

"Won't you sit down?" murmured Berthe Roumier sweetly, placing the chair so as to increase her colleague's strategic advantage.

Marion sat down without hesitation. No thought as to her own security crossed her mind. "Of course I do not ask you, or expect you, to make one single admission," she went on. "There is no need that I should, for whatever you are engaged on is no business of mine. It is to prove that to you that I have come. You know that I am Mrs. Leslie Armytage, whose yacht, the *Idalia*, arrived here from Southampton last night?"

Berthe Roumier smiled and shrugged her neat shoulders. "Surely to own to such knowledge would be to make an admission," she said slyly.

"So it would. How stupid of me. I really was not trying to trap you," Marion stammered, flushing at her obvious but quite unintentional "leading question." "What I want to tell you in all confidence is the history of my marriage, which took place a few days ago. Some time last spring I became engaged to a Mr. Nigel Lukyn, the son of

Lady Lukyn, of Lukyn Hall. He was almost immediately afterwards shut up in a lunatic asylum by his mother. I at once set to work to liberate him by finding a man so exactly like him that, without boring you with details, he could take Nigel's place in the asylum. The man I found was Leslie Armytage—an ex-army officer, whom I ought not to grumble at, as he served me well, but whom I have since had reason to suspect of bearing an indifferent character."

Marion paused and sighed unconsciously as she thought of her misplaced liking for the man with whom it had been a pleasure to plan Nigel's freedom.

"Well, *Mrs. Armytage?*" Berthe Roumier reminded her, with a gentle emphasis on the name, that she had broken off at the crucial point of the narrative.

The young wife nerved herself for the final confession which she fondly hoped was to protect her husband from the further attentions of these people. "There is not much more to tell," she said. "I should have thought that you would have guessed it from what I hinted about Armytage's usefulness to me. My husband is really not Leslie Armytage at all. He remains in the asylum, personating the man he so much resembles. The gentleman to whom I was married, and who is with me on the yacht, is the one to whom I was from first to last engaged—Nigel Lukyn."

She stopped, breathless, as though she expected her hearers to exclaim in their astonishment. Instead of that another telegraphic signal flashed from Berthe Roumier to Scorrier Voules, who

abandoned his strategic position and left the room. Berthe, who had been lolling in a low chair by the fire, rose and stood negligently leaning against the mantel-shelf.

"It is no admission to express interest in such a story," she said looking down at her visitor. "Nor must you take it as an admission if I am so deeply interested as to inquire what your object is in imparting it to us. You seem to have omitted that important point—possibly through inadvertence."

Marion glanced at her doubtfully. There seemed to be an undercurrent of mockery in Mademoiselle Roumier's pompous phrasing.

"That, if there is any reason in my having sought you out, ought to be pretty obvious," she replied firmly. "I want the misconceived persecution of my husband to cease. I do not say that I want it transferred to the real Leslie Armytage, for I should be sorry for anyone to undergo what we have at your—I mean at the hands of those who have mistaken the one for the other. Besides, perhaps there has been another mistake, and the real Leslie Armytage is not the person against whom this terrible grudge is held."

Berthe Roumier laughed, and to Marion, though there seemed to be a cruel ring in the laughter, there was relief in the sound. She persuaded herself that that sinister intonation was meant for her casual attempt at white-washing "the real Leslie Armytage," to whom her revelation would bode no good. She wished that she could invoke the aid of the law against these callous murderers,

who were hounding down an unfortunate enemy for some past folly, or it might be crime. But that she could not do without prematurely publishing to the world the fact that the dearly loved one, waiting for her on the yacht yonder, was a certified lunatic in the eye of the law, liable to be haled back to the asylum.

"You have created a very curious situation," said Berthe Roumier presently. "Before giving you any definite assurance on it I should like to consult my friend, if you do not mind waiting. I will not keep you long."

"I will wait, by all means," replied Marion, though she could not understand why the assurance was not given to her there and then.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN SUSPENSE.

BERTHE ROUMIER passed out and entered the front parlour of the dingy lodging-house. Scorrier Voules, who was its sole occupant, greeted her with a stifled explosion of mirth, in which Berthe joined heartily.

"Was there ever such an innocent—to walk straight into the lion's den with a confirmation of the theory we have never doubted and have been steadily acting on," she exclaimed.

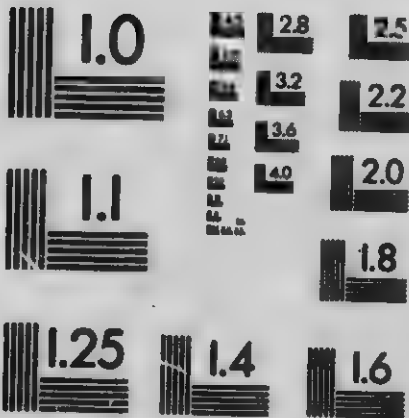
"It is too funny," Voules agreed with a renewed chuckle. "Lukyn has evidently been humbugging her that Armytage, the 'double,' ought to be the recipient of our unpleasant attentions, and she comes to us with the laudable idea of shifting them into that quarter. If we had had any lingering doubt as to which of the two she had married, she would have effectually removed it by her charming candour."

"The question is how to utilise the position," said Berthe thoughtfully. "It is full of infinite possibilities. We can do pretty nearly anything we like with her, because she is bound hand and



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foot from telling her yarn to the police. If she did, the first thing the authorities would do would be to drag Mr. Nigel Lukyn from her fond embrace and restore him to the asylum."

"How would it be to suggest that she should send for her husband to come here and corroborate her story, and then——?" Voules indicated his meaning with a gesture significant of a dagger-thrust.

"My dear Scorrier, you ought to know Nigel Lukyn from his record better than that," said Berthe. "The last thing the cur would do would be to obey such a summons into our presence—even at the instance of a four-days'-wed bride. He is a considerably scared man, you can bet, after that dose of gas he must have swallowed at Eyot Cottage the other night. But there is an alternative on the same lines, which we can use as a last resort."

"And that is?"

"A little gentle pressure on the lady," replied Berthe. "We might force her to write such a letter to him as would lull his suspicions and bring him here without any notion that he would meet us. My opinion is that the anxious wife has paid us this visit without his knowledge, or, knowing its futurity, he would have found some means for diverting her from the project. I should only be inclined to that course, however, if Fayter returns with a report of another failure. This is hardly the place or the house I should select for a final *coup* of that sort."

Voules strolled to the window and looked out upon the unfrequented street, along which the gas lamps were now shimmering at belated intervals.

Had there been an audience to this strange conclave the answer of this mild-mannered man, listlessly running his taper fingers through his wavy beard, would have sounded innocent enough. Yet every word was pregnant with murder. "There are only the old landlady and her daughter in the house," he suggested.

"True. You and Fayter could doubtless do the trick, but we should be hard put to it to get clear afterwards, unless we made a clean sweep of the lot," replied Berthe. "We want Nigel Lukyn badly, but we don't want a holocaust of innocent lodging-house women. No, I propose to keep Mrs. Armytage, as she calls herself, till Fayter comes in and then be guided by his report. If he has succeeded in converting the *Idalia* into a floating mine we needn't worry further, and can let the lady go."

"Frayne won't be back for a couple of hours at least," said Voules after a glance at his watch. "He would not be able to approach the J 't till after dark, and it is only four now. It may not be so easy to keep her if she insists on going, for I presume that force is out of the bill."

Berthe Roumier's face hardened. "I hope so," she said. "But we must use it if it is necessary. Come, Scorrier, we have left her too long. I will try and pass the time pleasantly for her till Fayter returns, and if she is not amenable, she must have the other thing. A woman who could mate with a man like Nigel Lukyn deserves no mercy, and I should wish her to know just why we are pressing her so hard. You play up to my lead."

They returned to the room at the back, where Marion had risen and was impatiently pacing to and fro. The delay in giving her an assurance that the persecution would cease was minute by minute growing more unintelligible to her. Of course she did not expect any compromising admission, but if there were any bowels of compassion in these Americans they would surely be able to convey to her that they intended no harm to a stranger who had done them no injury, and whom they had confounded with another.

She advanced upon them with a look of keen inquiry, which, however, met with no response. Voules, after holding the door for his companion to pass in, shut it and remained near it in a manner that began to inspire Marion with vague uneasiness.

"Won't you sit down again?" said Berthe Roumier. "It will take a little time to verify matters satisfactorily."

"But why? I cannot see that you have any reason to doubt my word," Marion retorted angrily. "Still, if you insist that there is need for verification, as you call it, I will go out into the town and return later."

"We must ask you to remain with us till we have come to a decision," said Berthe Roumier, in a tone that there was no mistaking. It seemed too ridiculous in this frowsy apartment-house in a popular sea-side resort, but Marion recognised that she was a prisoner. The woman's manner, and the attitude of the tall, round-shouldered figure hovering near the door, convinced her that any attempt to leave would be forcibly frustrated. Choking down an

impulse to scream for help, which could only end in the whole circumstances of her marriage becoming public property, she decided on diplomacy, and sat down.

"As you are so very pressing," she said, forcing a smile, and wondering at the subtle influence which this girlish person and her languid male colleague began to exercise over her. The personalities of both were attractive rather than otherwise, yet for the first time in her life she knew what *fear* was—the kind of fear of the unseen and unknown that sets knees shaking and hands trembling.

Berthe Roumier diagnosed her mental symptoms with the skill that had caused her selection for a four-thousand-mile journey, and sat down opposite her visitor.

"I should like to tell you a little story, Mrs. Lukyn—I beg your pardon, you prefer to be called Mrs. Armytage for the present," she began. "It is quite as interesting as the one you have told my friend and me, and has a relative bearing on your own narrative. But," added Berthe, with a cold laugh, "if you care to hear it, I shall tell it 'without prejudice,' as the lawyers say, and as no admission, you understand?"

"I accept your reservation, though I had hoped that I had convinced you that you had no interest in me, or I in anything that may be interesting you," replied Marion coldly.

Berthe Roumier acknowledged the repudiation of linked concerns with a bow that might mean anything from polite assent to satirical scepticism.

"There was a well-born Englishman," she began,

"who two years ago arrived in America with the laudable object of earning the livelihood which his own country had apparently denied to him. To speak more correctly, as he was possessed of some means, it was more than a livelihood—it was a fortune—that he was after, and as a fortune-hunter he was a dead failure in a land where people have to hustle to get dollars. In six months his capital was gone, and he had no means of raising more.

"Being in receipt of an allowance from home, he was not, absolutely penniless, but as he was addicted to several expensive vices, he looked round for a method of increasing his income. In my country there are many secret organisations of manual toilers pledged to counteract the tyranny of capital, and one of the most strenuous of these was making its power felt among the financial magnates. What does our English gentleman do but affiliate himself to the obnoxious society in order to betray its secrets to its capitalist enemies?

"He furnished the great combinations with lists of the most active workers in the cause of labour; he divulged the plan of campaign of the society; in spite of his vows of allegiance, taken on purpose to be broken, he played the part of a traitor systematically, and with such diabolical cunning that for a long time he went unsuspected. But the society has long arms and ears, and his career was cut short just after it had reached its climax in a piece of arrant scoundrelism almost too heartless and cruel for belief.

"One of the most vigorous chiefs in this particular labour society was, in his working hours, an employé

of a mighty trust controlling one of the world's greatest industries. The man was considered dangerous by the capitalists, but they dared not ruin him by discharge, for fear of retaliation on the part of the society. They devised a shorter and cheaper way of drawing his honest teeth by trumping up a criminal charge of embezzlement against him, and for the purpose of substantiating it they suborned as a false witness the treacherous Englishman who had already furnished his name and revealed his activity. The labour leader was convicted and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, his old mother's grey hairs were sent in sorrow to the grave, and his wife and children were thrown on the charity of friends.

"The traitor, heavily paid for his services, was working up cases against other members of the society, when he learned that those whom he was betraying had got wind of his doings, and he fled to England the day before his death was decreed by the inner council of the organisation, strictly in accordance with its laws—laws to which he had himself subscribed and helped to administer. He may have thought that he was safe when he was clear of American soil, but therein he fell into grievous error. The society does not so lightly loose grip of its enemies or abandon its decrees. Delegates were despatched to follow him to this country, and though they were at fault at first, they are on the right track at last, and will show no mercy—make no more mistakes."

Berthe Roumier concluded in the melodramatic key she had purposely struck, but Marion was not

visibly impressed by it. In fact, her one paramount sensation was one of thankfulness that her husband could not possibly have been guilty of the vile conduct that had provoked the lawless vengeance of the Knights of Industry. It was a matter of surprise to her that "the real Leslie Armytage," as her remembrance of him went, could have acted in the base manner so graphically described.

"Your story, though not an admission, is intended as a justification, I suppose," she said. "I am quite willing to take it without prejudice, for I am really not concerned with it, except so far as it affects a man I paid to do me a certain service. I had hoped that I had already convinced you of that."

Berthe rose and rang the bell. "Bring some tea, please," she said to the untidy daughter of the house, who appeared after an awkward pause.

True to her decision to ignore as long as possible the intention to detain her against her will, Marion accepted a cup of tea when it came, and even allowed herself to listen with some show of amusement to Mr. Scorrier Voules' dissertations on the short-comings of London hotels from the American point of view. For, by common consent, the conversation was diverted to general topics. After half an hour of this, Marion began to forget that she was in the company of two determined emissaries from a powerful society delegated to take a deadly vengeance, till she realised that their airy trifling covered a desire to kill time. Then there began to steal over her again the feeling of fear that had seized her before Berthe Roumier's story.

Why should they want to keep her in this dirty back room, first harrowing her with details with which she and her husband had nothing to do, and now talking common-places with the volubility of obstructive members of Parliament?

The end to her suspense came at last in the sudden bursting into the room of the fierce-eyed little man whom she had first seen at Weybridge station, and whom Quayne had held to be the author of the shooting outrage at Pinecroft. Usually well-groomed in frock coat and silk hat, he now wore a blue serge suit and a cloth cap.

"Success!" he cried in his guttural voice. "I got close in the darkness and fixed it to rights. It's a sure——"

But in obedience to Berthe Roumier's uplifted hand and angry glance, directing his astonished gaze to Marion, he came to an abrupt stop.

"Go into the front room," commanded Berthe hurriedly. "And you," she added to Voules, "stay here and entertain our guest, to whom in a few minutes now we shall probably have to say adieu."

With which she followed Fayter Frayne out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FACE IN THE MOONLIGHT.

"How in thunder did she come to be here, and what does it mean?" growled Frayne, as soon as Berthe joined him in the front parlour of the lodging-house. "It means that the good work I've put in has gone for nothing, eh?"

Berthe was in high good humour, and hastily accounted for Marion's presence in the house by the obvious explanation that she had intercepted Crispin's letter. In a few sentences she told her surly confederate how Marion, evidently genuine in her professions, had come to them in the belief that they were really hunting Armytage, the "double," and not Lukyn, the man she confessed to having married in the name of Armytage.

"Complex, but quite simple when you follow the workings of this unfortunate lady's mind in arranging her expedient for rescuing her lover," Berthe concluded her explanation. "Now, I gather from your injudicious boast just now that you have carried out the *Idalia* programme?"

"I rather reckon so," replied Frayne. "You'll

be ready enough to give Voules the credit for making the thing, but you'll have to spare some to me for fixing it. It was no child's play to navigate a small boat single-handed among a lot of cross currents you are ignorant of, and bring her close to a steamer without a soul on board being the wiser."

"I don't under-estimate your skill—still less your devotion," said Berthe. "So no one saw you from the *Idalia*?"

"Couldn't have. I heard nobody about on deck, and rowed my boat right under her counter without being hailed. The machine is clamped onto her in such a position that when it goes off it will blow the propeller and the rudder clean out of her. In fact, if the stuff Voules used is as strong as he says, the entire stern should go, and the yacht sink inside five minutes. There is something I ought to report to you though, Berthe," added Frayne with evident reluctance.

"What is it?" his principal demanded sharply.

"The man we are after is ashore in the town—got tired of waiting on board for her, I reckon. I saw him twice—once before I did the trick, and again on landing afterwards. Queer chap he must be, for he was wearing a heavy overcoat the first time I saw him, and just now, long after sundown, he had left it off. But that's neither here nor there."

"Quite right to inform me of his being ashore," said Berthe. "You suggest that we might get him without destroying the yacht and many un-offending people?"

Fayter Frayne nodded, and Berthe Roumier fell into a brief reverie.

"No!" she exclaimed at last. "We owe it to ourselves and our cause to take the lesser risk. A pistol-shot or a knife-thrust might perhaps achieve our object, but it might be followed by the capture of one or all of us. We have not prepared for flight as we did at Weybridge and Maidenhead. And there would be the additional risk of removing the explosive from the yacht, which would have to be done *after the event*, with everyone on the *qui vive*, for we should have to kill him at once—before he returned on board."

"I doubt if it could be done," said Frayne. "There would be all kinds of traffic between the yacht and the shore—policemen, coroner's officials, and all that. The attempt would fail, and the torpedo would burst up just the same."

"Exactly," Berthe agreed. "And we have gone too far to study the humane side. After all, what does it amount to—a rich woman and her toy, with all her crowd of pampered, overpaid parasites blown to atoms. No, a thousand times no! Such a paltry consideration must not weigh for an instant against the duty we owe to ourselves and the prestige of the society in striking surely but secretly."

"If the three of us were brought up before the magistrates to-morrow charged with a common longshore murder, the Knights of Industry would certainly have to sing uncommon small," Frayne assented.

"Well, then, we will let Mrs. Armytage, as she calls herself, return to her yacht," said Berthe.

"You are a little dishevelled, Fayter, and your appearance might set her thinking. Stay here and have the whisky and soda you have earned while I go and release her. We shall be back in civilisation soon now, I trust."

The man looked after the slight figure hungrily as it slipped out into the passage. "She gave me my meed of praise at last, but she grudged it," he growled, tossing some spirits into a glass. "It is Scorrier Voules who will get the credit for the sinking of the *Idalia*."

In the meanwhile Berthe Roumier entered the back room and informed Marion in a carefully-chosen sentence that "the matter she had come to explain had been inquired into with satisfactory results."

"Which means that I may return to the yacht and give my husband the happy assurance that we shall not be again molested," cried Marion, too pleased with what she regarded as the success of her self-set task to question the ambiguity of the other's words. She took it for granted that the phrase "satisfactory results" applied to her own point of view.

"There is nothing to keep you longer," said Berthe, standing aside for her to pass out, and motioning Voules to open the street door. "One moment, though," she added quickly, as if it was an afterthought. "Now that we are not likely to cross each other's paths again, I should so like to know the name of the clever agent who placed you in touch with us? I have no right to ask a favour, or any claim upon your consideration, but pray oblige a very natural curiosity."

She spoke so winningly that Marion, flushed as she was with victory, forgot for the moment the character of the woman who made the apparently innocent appeal. "It was Quayne, the celebrated detective, of the Strand," she answered. "But perhaps, as an American, you have never heard of him."

"Oh, but indeed yes, I have heard of Mr. Quayne," said Berthe. "I do not wonder that you have found out so much about us. Well, good-night, Mrs. Armytage, if you still wish to use that name. I regret to have detained you so long, but it was better to arrive at a final settlement."

Marion thought so too as she sped through the maze of streets towards the landing-stage, and that it was a final settlement, in the comfortable sense, she had no doubt. Her chief concern for the moment was to allay as speedily as possible the anxiety which her husband must be feeling at her long absence from the ship. She had landed at three o'clock for an hour or so, as she had led him to suppose, and now it was nearly eight. The dear fellow would be frantic, and she would forgive him if he had broken her injunction and come ashore to look for her.

That the motor-launch, with Mr. Saunders in a rare pucker, would be at the steps waiting for her she was confident, and sure enough there was the faithful second-officer bobbing up and down in the tiny vessel, which had a companion now in one of the yacht's row boats.

His discipline was too strong, and his affectionate regard for his owner was too sincere to allow any

expression of surprise at her belated appearance. Steadying the launch close to the steps, he reached his hand to help her aboard.

"Mr. Armytage is in the town somewhere, looking for you," he announced. "I have been here since four o'clock, but he came ashore later in the dinghy. Ah, there he is! We're in luck this time."

Marion had begun to descend the steps, but, guided by Saunders' gesture, she turned and looked up to the parapet of the landing-stage. It was bright moonlight, and it showed her her husband's face, a little strained, as was only to be expected, peering down at her. He was wearing a long coat that she had not seen before. He must have felt chilly, the poor thing, and bought it in the town, she told herself.

"Here you are, dear, and here am I," she cried joyously. "Hop into the launch. You are fully pardoned for your breach of orders."

CHAPTER XXIII.

QUAYNE'S NEWS.

AFTER his wife's departure on a professed shopping expedition in the town, Leslie began by faithfully obeying her instructions to make himself pleasant to Aunt Jane in the saloon. The old lady, believing him to be Nigel Lukyn, seized her opportunity, making references to Lady Lukyn, and, as far as her delicacy would permit, pumping him as to the supposed reason for his being sent to Grey Gables.

At last, finding his ingenuity unequal to parrying her questions, he left her and returned to the deck, where he remained till he judged it was time for Marion to return. The second officer had long ago gone in the motor-launch to fetch her, and in the fading twilight he could just descry the little craft at the landing-stage.

Then the darkness of the early winter night blotted out all view of the shore except the street lamps and the lighted windows along the sea-front. An hour passed, and still the launch came not. Leslie began to pace to and fro, consumed with

an impatience that was rapidly growing into anxiety. He tried to persuade himself that he had no real cause for it, having every reason to think that the Americans were trailing across Europe on a false scent. All the same, his wife's absence continued unaccountable, unless some disaster had befallen her.

He sought her maid, in the hope of allaying his fears.

"Your mistress must have a great deal of shopping to do, Crispin," he said.

His ill-disguised concern drew a malevolent smile from the traitress. "On the contrary, sir," she replied with evident relish, "I was surprised that Mrs. Armytage should have gone ashore at all. I am sure I don't know what she wanted in the way of purchases. Would you wish me to go into the town and look for her?"

But Leslie, now thoroughly alarmed, affirmed that he would go himself. Having imparted his intention to Aunt Jane, and obtained her eager approval, he ordered out one of the smaller ship's boats and had himself rowed to the steps. The motor launch was still waiting there, and Mr. Saunders had seen nothing of Marion.

Trying to comfort himself with the reflection that she would be found in one of the shops, Leslie quitted the sea-front and made his way to the commercial part of the town. Though it was only six o'clock, there was something in the aspect of the streets, as he turned out of the residential quarter, that struck chill to his heart. The shop windows were all dark, with the shutters up, except the public-houses and tea-rooms.

He questioned the first passer-by as to the, to him, inexplicable stagnation, and received the reply that it was "early-closing day." All the shops had been shut at two o'clock.

Leslie muttered his thanks for information which fairly staggered him. His wife had come ashore avowedly to make purchases at the shops; she had been gone hours longer than her professed intention; yet the shops had been closed some time before she left the yacht. There was something very wrong somewhere.

Pulling himself together, he went into the restaurants and tea-rooms, and, describing Marion as best he could, asked if she had been seen. He met with civility everywhere, but with no satisfaction. No one had seen a lady answering to his description during the afternoon.

He ran back to the landing-steps to see if Marion had arrived during his search in the town, but Saunders, cold and hungry, but still uncomplaining, could give him no news of her. He determined next to extend his quest by inquiring at the hotels and the railway station. She might have gone to explore one of the historic mansions in the neighbourhood, or have met a friend staying at one of the hotels. But no; there was no such relief in store, and he sought the water-side again. The *Idalia's* launch and boat were still waiting patiently, but there had been no sign of the fair young owner.

"The only thing I can suggest, sir, and it's against the grain to do it, is that Mrs. Armytage may have met with an accident. In that event it might be

as well to inquire at the various doctors' houses, as well as at the cottage hospital," said Saunders.

With a heavy heart Leslie turned away once more, and began a weary round of calls on the half score of medical men in the place. As their residences lay at considerable distances apart, and some of the doctors were socially or professionally engaged, it was not till two hours after his last visit to the launch that he completed his inquiries. Once more he arrived at the landing-steps, baffled and rendered desperate by a fruitless quest.

But this time a greater shock was in store for him. The motor-launch, and the dinghy in which he himself had come ashore, were both gone. For the moment he was thrilled with joy at the thought that Marion must have turned up, and that, taking pity on the waiting sailors, she had ordered the dinghy back to the yacht as well as the launch, leaving him to follow in a shore-boat.

An instant later, however, he raised his eyes to where, a blaze of electric light, the *Idalia* should be lying. At first he could hardly believe his senses. The place where the yacht had been anchored was vacant, and nowhere on the broad bosom of the estuary, bathed now in white moonbeams, was there any trace of her. Marion must not only have returned on board, but she must have immediately ordered Captain Crawford to put to sea.

The thing was incomprehensible. Leslie could only imagine that the sword which he had been dreading had fallen, and that his wife had discovered

his deception in advance of his too-long deferred confession. But that she should adopt the cruel course of sailing away without a word of explanation seemed foreign to the very essence of her character. Anger, scorn, and open recrimination he was prepared for; but it was unlike Marion to strike a man down without hearing his defence. And oh, how he had hoped that the defence he would plead—the defence of his great, all-conquering love—would prevail. A hope against hope, perhaps, but he had clung to it till now, when the water rippling where the yacht had loomed so largely told him that his wife—yes, she was still that, whatever she and the world might say—had punished him with flight.

It was past ten o'clock, and the night bade fair to be frosty. In his haste he had come ashore without an overcoat, and standing on the quay he began to feel the chill after his wild rush round the town. No purpose would be served by his remaining there in the open. The *Idalia* was clean gone from the Exe, and if he was to sleep—save the mark—it would have to be in an hotel. Luckily he had enough money on his person for his present needs, and though it came from Marion, he thought no harm to use it, as it was what she had given him while he was carrying out her original behest. Money earned by a month's residence at Grey Gables was not lightly earned.

He was turning sorrowfully away from the shimmering river's mouth to traverse the nearly-deserted landing-stage, when he saw the figure of a man, warmly muffled, advancing towards him. They

met in the full glare of a gas lamp, and with one accord they halted in their tracks.

"Mr. Quayne!" was the involuntary exclamation drawn from Leslie.

The detective did not answer immediately. He came a step nearer and peered into Leslie's face.

"Mr. *Armytage*, and when I call you that I mean it without reservation, though you are the man I last saw in the hotel at Broadstairs," he said at length.

"Yes, and the same man who was with you at Weybridge, and whom you consigned as a voluntary inmate to Grey Gables," replied Leslie, relieving himself of the admission as of a load that had been too heavy to bear.

And then, as an explanation rather than a justification, he told of how his great love for Marion had succumbed to overwhelming temptation on the occasion of his going to Broadstairs to report his failure to do her bidding at the asylum, owing to the undoubted madness of Nigel Lukyn—how he had reason to believe that she loved him personally, and not the man he so much resembled—how he had preferred to brave the menace of the mysterious Americans rather than lose that love.

"Have you confessed to your wife?" Quayne asked shortly.

"Not yet; I have most weakly put it off," Leslie was fain to admit.

"Well, it's for her, not for me, to blame you," said the detective, with a curious intonation in his voice. "The whole thing is a pretty coil. I came down to see Mrs. *Armytage* about those same

Americans, who are here in Exmouth at this moment—about them and some news from Grey Gables in which you will be interested. Nigel Lukyn has escaped from the asylum, and is still at large."

"My God!" cried Leslie. "His one idea was to gratify a murderous impulse against my wife. After all, I am glad she has gone to sea out of harm's way."

And he hastened to inform the detective of the events of the afternoon, first touching briefly on what had happened at Maidenhead and Southampton. Quayne listened in all seriousness, and then cast a roving glance round the landing-place.

"Come," he said, "this must not be neglected for an instant. Someone must have seen Mrs. Armytage return to the launch, and a vessel of the *Idalia's* size cannot have left her anchorage without being observed. There is a gentleman who might know something. He seems a fixture on that post."

Quayne's keen eyes had pounced on a blue-guernseyed fisherman, leaning in characteristic attitude against one of the bollards on the quay. Leslie, in his weariness of mind and body, had failed to perceive anyone on that part of the fringe.

"Waiting for the tide to run, eh, friend?" said the detective affably. "I wonder if you saw a lady go on board a yacht's launch about an hour or so ago? The launch had been at the steps the best part of the afternoon."

"I seed her right enough," was the reply, "and the steamer worked out to sea directly she reached

her. I took particular notice, I did, because the lady asked me the way to Holroyd Street when she first come ashore. But Lord!" he exclaimed, his stolid face lighting up as his glance fell on Leslie, "this gent can tell 'ee more about it than I can."

"How so?" asked Quayne sharply.

"Why, he went onto the launch along of the lady," replied the man. "I seed 'un, for all the long coat he were wearing. The garment didn't cover his face, I'm telling 'ee."

The same words rose simultaneously to the lips of Leslie and of Quayne—

"Nigel Lukyn!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

QUAYNE'S FEARS.

THE two men exchanged glances of horror and amazement over information which left no doubt that Nigel Lukyn had accompanied Marion back to the *Idalia*. To Leslie Armytage the situation was so charged with terror that he had need of all his manhood to keep from bursting into tears. Marion must have taken Nigel Lukyn, a homicidal maniac, on board the yacht in the belief that he was himself, her husband, and had steamed away beyond recall.

"Tell me," said Quayne, leading Leslie out of earshot of the informant, "was he so very bad when you were with him at the asylum?"

"It was my sole reason for not doing my wife's bidding," replied Leslie. "At intervals he was as bad as anyone could be—so violent that he had to be kept under close restraint. And his greatest antipathy seemed to be against Miss Fermor, now my wife. Both in his ravings and his quieter moods he never tired of uttering threats of what he would do to her, for, as he believed, having him put away."

Strangely enough, Quayne expressed approval on hearing this. Pressed for his reasons, he expounded the theory that the more outrageous Lukyn's conduct, the greater the probability that the yacht would either promptly return to Exmouth or put in at some other port along the coast.

"If he breaks out, as he is pretty certain to do under the excitement of his successful escape, your wife will at least be surrounded by faithful adherents to protect her," the detective continued. "And if Mrs. Armytage fails to discover at once that he is not the gentleman with whom she began her honeymoon, she will conclude that you, whom she believes to be Lukyn, have had a relapse of the mental malady which got him consigned to the asylum. Take comfort from the fact that he is sure to behave in such a way that she will keep him at arm's length in any case. And now come along. We can be better employed. than kicking our heels here."

Hardly knowing what he was doing, but thankful for expert guidance, Leslie accompanied the detective to the Imperial Hotel, where Quayne had already engaged a room. Another having been booked for Leslie, the two adjourned to the smoking-room, where Quayne ordered whisky and cigars.

"We haven't time to eat, and I daresay you haven't the inclination," he said. "The clue the fisherman gave us must be followed to-night. He said that Mrs. Armytage, on coming ashore, inquired the way to Holroyd Street. If I am not mistaken, something must have happened to her

there which will account for the sudden departure of the *Idalia* directly she returned."

"But you don't know the number in the street," said Leslie hopelessly.

"Oh come, buck up, man!" Quayne replied. "What am I for but to find out things, and to judge by Peckthorne's face he has found out something already. I brought him down for that kind of work, and I am open to wager that in a couple of hours he has located the Yankees."

Gliding into the room in the wake of a waiter, who looked ashamed of his company, came the wizened old man who had shadowed Berthe Roumier to the lifeboat-house at Broadstairs.

"Got 'em, Peckthorne?" was Quayne's laconic question.

"47, Holroyd Street," was the equally concise answer.

"Then cut away and go to sleep in any crib you can find, and report to me here at eight to-morrow morning," said Quayne. "Now, Mr. Armytage," he went on, rising and looking down at Leslie as he spoke, "I am going to take the matter up where that old chap has left it. Your wife has evidently been in touch with Mademoiselle Roumier and her confederates—probably to endeavour to persuade them that they are really after the other fellow, as in fact they are. If I can discover what Mrs. Armytage said and did there, we may learn more about the *Idalia's* future movements. We are powerless till we do that."

Leslie was half dazed by the day's experience, but he was grateful for this strong man's help.

"You seem to have dropped from the skies to aid me," he said, "though I don't understand how you happen to be here at all."

"Because your wife wired me from Southampton of the activity of the Americans. I went to see you, as I then thought, at Grey Gables, to learn if you could throw any light on their designs, since in the personality of Lukyn you had disclaimed all knowledge of them. From what Doctor Beaman told me of his patient's recent outrageous conduct, followed by his escape, I deduced things pretty much on the lines of what you have just confessed. I then hurried on here to see if I could be of use as an intermediary, for it was evident that the vengeance of these secret delegates was not directed against my client's husband, but against the man who has broken out of the asylum."

"You are surely not going to tell them that now?" said Leslie quickly.

"Not so long as Lukyn is on board the *Idalia*," replied Quayne with grim significance as he went out.

After his departure Leslie had the smoking-room to himself, and he sat pondering over that last remark of the detective. Quayne clearly apprehended danger of some kind to the yacht, and to enlighten Berthe Roumier and her colleagues as to the real state of the case would be in direct opposition to his object of removing the peril. Possibly it would undo some good that Marion herself might have wrought on her visit to these people. In centring their attention on the *Idalia*

they had hitherto been making a blunder, but now that Lukyn had so unaccountably taken his place, they were on the right track at last, and, if informed of their previous error, would redouble their efforts against the yacht, if only out of exasperation at having been so nearly misled into a futile crime.

It was on the stroke of midnight when Quayne returned, his face, usually so impassive, expressive of failure. "Come to my room," he said, as Leslie sprang to meet him. "They will be shutting up down here directly."

"Well?" Leslie put the hoarse question when the bed-room door had closed.

Quayne took a revolver from his hip pocket and laid it on the dressing-table. "There was a brief crisis half an hour ago when I nearly had to use that little friend," he said. Then he turned and faced Leslie with: "That is a dangerous gang, Mr. Armytage. I was unpleasantly impressed with their capacity and deadly earnestness. I didn't beat about the bush, but simply informed them that they were known, and that if any harm befell the *Idalia* or anyone aboard her they would make acquaintance with English hemp. That was when I thought they would go for me—the pretty little wild-cat who leads them, and her male cut-throats. But it is only a dirty little lodging-house in a crowded street, and the risk was too heavy for them. They thought better of it, and laughed at me."

"Laughed?" echoed Leslie feebly.

"Yes, laughed," Quayne repeated, with savage

recollections of one of his few defeats. "They had the whip-hand, you see. They pointed out—at least, that clever little French woman did—that your wife having married a man out of a lunatic asylum, anything that happened to the yacht was not likely to be attributed to anyone else. I could not refute the argument. We have no actual proof against them on the previous attempts, and cannot have them arrested. And if we could, I fear it would be too late. There was a fiendish self-assurance about them that suggested the achievement of their purpose."

"You mean danger to the yacht by explosion, or some such contrivance?"

"So I should gather," replied Quayne, eyeing Leslie curiously, for there was a new ring in his voice not hitherto noticeable.

"My wife has seen them to-day?"

"Yes; they admitted sneeringly that they had had an amusing visit from Mrs. Armytage, but they would say nothing about the purport of it."

And what steps do you propose to prevent this unknown peril?" Leslie inquired in the same tone. He seemed to have awoke suddenly from the apathy of despair to a ready comprehension of details. He was almost masterful—a strange attitude for a man in his position to take up.

Quayne answered him with a question: "Am I right in the surmise that the *Idalia* is fitted with a wireless telegraphy apparatus?"

"Quite right," said Leslie. "It was one of old Mr. Fermor's fads. He had it installed just

before he died—as soon as the invention was successful.”

“Therein lies our medium of communication with the yacht, if we only knew what to communicate,” said Quayne. “I could run down to the Marconi station at Poldhu in Cornwall and get in touch with her. The trouble is that there is no tangible danger to warn her captain against. I might send out an urgent request to return and yet be too late to save her, supposing her to have some sort of infernal machine concealed on board. She would probably be headed for the nearest port, yet the thing might go off before she reached it.”

“But if you could furnish particulars of her danger those on board could remove it at once. That is your meaning?” said Leslie. And again he spoke with a quiet assurance that puzzled the detective.

“That is what I mean—provided, of course, that no catastrophe should have befallen the yacht before we could set the Marconi people to-work,” Quayne replied.

There ensued a silence during which the two men looked at each other intently, but with quite different emotions. One, the skilled investigator, was striving to read his companion’s mind; the other was not even thinking of him at whom he looked.

“I will get you those particulars—in time for you to start for Poldhu by the first train in the morning,” said Leslie at length. “I hope to be back in an hour. If not, the coroner will probably

have a job in Holroyd Street. I presume that there is a night-porter who will let me in if all goes well."

"I think I see your drift," Quayne exclaimed, as he accompanied him to the door. "And, by George, Mr. Armytage, whatever blame you may incur in this matter, no one will say that you are a coward."

CHAPTER XXV.

ATONEMENT.

As Leslie Armytage traversed the now silent and deserted streets in the short walk that was to bring him to Holroyd Street, he was conscious of a feeling of exhilaration—the first real happiness he had known since his marriage. He was on his way to expiate, if he could, the deception he had practised on his wife in marrying her, not under a false name, but in Nigel Lukyn's personality.

That in approaching the conspirators he ran a risk of being assassinated during the next half-hour he was well aware, but that only troubled him in so far as it would frustrate the purpose he had in view. He had high hopes that the Americans would hold their hands for the same personal reason that had induced them to let Quayne go unscathed—the difficulty of murdering a man in a small lodging-house and of getting away afterwards without previous preparation.

Yet, for all his hope for present immunity, when he turned into Holroyd Street it was with the intention of paying the heaviest price that a man

can pay for the wrong that he had done—the price being the life that was just beginning to be sweet to him, in spite of his precarious hold on Marion's love.

There was a dull gleam in the glass fanlight over the door at Number 47, and Leslie, with an instinctive guess that the people of the house would have gone to bed, forebore to press the electric bell into a vibrant summons. He used the cheap iron knocker very softly, and in accord with his expectations was rewarded by the appearance of one of the lodgers. The door was almost instantly slid half open, and there stood Scorrier Voules, blinking solemnly, with the weariness of a man kept out of his bed long after time, yet full of forced alertness.

Suddenly he stiffened as his eyes pierced the gloom, and he uttered an inarticulate cry of astonishment.

"Mister—Mister——?" he stammered, as though groping for the name.

"Nigel Lukyn," Leslie filled in the blank firmly. "I can understand your surprise, sir. You thought that I was at sea on the *Idalia*."

Voules' manner changed at once. "You wish to see us?" he said suavely. "Step in, please. It is rather late, and therefore fortunate that you find us still up."

Leslie crossed the mean threshold into the narrow passage, and was conducted to the back room where Marion had been held virtually a prisoner earlier in the day. There was a world of pregnant meaning in Voules' announcement of the name he had given.

Fayter Frayne, who had been leaning against the mantel-piece, took an uncontrolled step forward, and then recovered himself, scowling fiercely. And Berthe Roumier, lolling in a cane chair beside the fire-place, scanned the late visitor with a quick, bird-like glance in which the genuine curiosity was kept under by an obvious effort. Voules closed the door and set his back against it.

"Is it Mrs. Armytage's Nigel Lukyn, or the other one?" said Berthe, studiously refraining from changing her position.

"Mrs. Armytage's Nigel Lukyn—the real one," Leslie replied; "the one who ought to be on the *Idalia*, but who stayed behind because he has some private business to transact. The fact that I have met and had a talk with Mr. Quayne will explain how I obtained your address."

"But not how Mr. Quayne obtained it," Berthe Roumier purred in that soft, dangerous voice of hers.

"Quayne knows most things," said Leslie curtly. And then, remembering that it was not his cue to exasperate them against Marion, he added quickly: "Quayne traced you by his ordinary channels. He did not arrive in Exmouth till after my wife had sailed in the yacht."

The information that the yacht had sailed was evidently new to them. The trio exchanged glances which turned Leslie sick with fear for the woman he loved. The three pairs of eyes plainly telegraphed to each other nothing so gentle as remorse, but a selfish regret for trouble and risk vainly incurred. He was convinced now that some hideous

fate had been prepared for the *Idali*, and her passengers.

Berthe Roumier turned again to him, inexorable in her calm scrutiny. Leslie, ignorant whether she had a personal acquaintance with Lukyn, trembled for the success of his plan, which depended entirely on his keeping up the deception. But there was no such breakdown in store for him. The delegates of the Knights of Industry were working solely from a photograph, and had never come into contact with the man they thirsted to kill.

"Well, Mr. Lukyn," Berthe said at last, "such an extraordinary visit must be traceable to an extraordinary motive. You are aware, I presume, that you stand very near to death at this moment—that I am, in fact, debating in my mind whether or no to allow you to leave this room alive?"

Leslie gave her back look for look. "Considerations for your own safety should inspire you with the wisdom to do that," he said. "Especially as the motive for my visit is to make a bargain with you which will enable you to attain your object quite easily and without risk to yourselves."

Fayter Frayne snorted, incredulous, and his itching fingers sought his pocket. Berthe Roumier frowned him down, and politely invited the visitor to explain his meaning more fully. "Ours has been such a strenuous task that we shall be glad to be spared both trouble and risk in the future," she added, with that bland semi-note of sarcasm that was in itself a danger-signal.

"My proposition is this," said Leslie, ignoring the sneer. "Quayne suggests that you have placed an infernal machine on the *Idalia* with the object of killing me. Well, here I am on shore—secure from anything that may happen to the yacht. But, if you have done this thing, my wife and close on a hundred innocent people will be sacrificed—from your point of view, quite uselessly. Now, you believe me to be very base, no doubt, or you would not be so keen to wreak your vengeance on me, but I am not so base as to let all those people and the wife I love go down when my worthless life thrown into the balance can save them."

Berthe was watching him intently—the passion in his voice was obviously genuine. "Go on, Mr. Lukyn," she said. "You are becoming interesting, but you must not expect admissions—yet."

"This is what I ask," Leslie continued. "Put me in a position to communicate the nature of their danger to those on the yacht by a wireless telegram from the Marconi station in Cornwall, and I will engage to be at any place you choose to name, unarmed, and without having informed a living soul of the *rendezvous*. Let it be as lonely as you like, and let the appointment be at any hour of the day or night. I will further promise to offer no resistance. My one stipulation is that I am first assured that the *Idalia* has been freed from the peril of whatever you have done to her."

Berthe Roumier consulted her *confrères* with her eyes. Scorrier Voules, with his back to the door,

looked lazily acquiescent; Fayter Frayne, at the mantel-piece, truculent but non-committal. It was a case for the casting-vote, and it was not given immediately.

"Forgive me, Mr. Lukyn," said Berthe smoothly, "but your past record is hardly a guarantee of good faith. You have an able ally in the detective, Quayne. Without actually informing him of the *rendezvous* which you are good enough to suggest, you might drop him a hint which would result in your being ceaselessly shadowed—protected. How are we to know that you will keep the compact in spirit as well as in the letter?"

"I foresaw that as the weak spot in my scheme," replied Leslie, and there was no mistaking his real distress. "I can only give you my word that from the moment I leave this house to-night I will do my best to mislead Quayne—to persuade him that I am in no need of his services. There must be some give-and-take. What guarantee have I, if you accept my proposal, that the information which you furnish to be telegraphed to the yacht will be correct?"

Again a silence that seemed to Leslie to last for years, and then Berthe raised her head and spoke sharply to Frayne. "Tell him," she said, "exactly where you fixed the machine."

Sullenly, and with his ever-present sense of grievance strong upon him, Frayne obeyed, and furnished the particulars necessary for the undoing of his villainous handiwork. Leslie was too intent on committing his words to memory, so as to reproduce them without a flaw, to look at Scorrier Voules

during the recital. Had he done so he would have observed that the taller of the two men was regarding his colleague with a keen enjoyment.

"And when—when?" Leslie hardly dared trust himself to put the question on which so much might depend.

"When will it go off?" Berthe callously helped him out. "It is timed for between four and five o'clock to-morrow afternoon—twenty-four hours after it was set. And now, Mr. Lukyn, it remains for you to fulfil your part of the bargain. You will take a walk on the cliffs to-morrow night beyond Littleham, between the hours of one and two. Here, you can see it on the local map."

Leslie followed her finger on a map which was lying on the table. Measured by scale, the line she traced halted at a spot about three miles from the town.

"That is West Down Beacon," he said, reading from the map.

"Just so, and below it—between the high ground and the sea—is an extensive landslip marked 'The Floors.' You will, if you are not met before, prolong your walk from the cliff-path down into the seclusion of 'The Floors,' Mr. Lukyn. That is all, I think, except to add that we shall trust you as you have trusted us."

It seemed to Leslie that the calm, even tones might also have comprised the phrase: "May God have mercy on your soul," for, as Voules opened the door at a sign from Berthe and conducted him to the street, he knew himself sentenced to death

as surely as if his judge had worn scarlet and ermine instead of a costume bearing the hall-mark of Worth.

But he had as good as saved Marion—if the yacht could be brought to harbour in time to save her from that other and, to his mind, still graver peril—Nigel Lukyn.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"RELAPSE."

As the motor-launch, released at last from its long wait at the landing-steps, sped towards the *Idalia*, Marion could not find it in her heart to talk trivialities, and the true history of her afternoon could not be told before Saunders. She therefore sat silent, and only once whispered to the coated figure at her side—

"Such heaps of news, dearest. Everything will be all right now."

"And about time too," was the answer that caused Marion a thrill of pained surprise. It was the first rough word she had ever heard from her husband's lips, and there was something so vulgar in the common-place rudeness that Marion soon condoned it as due to anxiety over her long absence. And "poor Leslie" must be half perished with cold—the cold that had made him buy that huge coat in the town.

As soon as she reached the deck of the yacht, Marion turned towards the bridge, beneath which were Captain Crawford's chart-room and private

cabin. To her companion she nodded affectionately as she separated from him.

"I have something to say to the captain, dear," she explained. "You will be wanting something to eat as badly as I do. I will join you in the saloon almost immediately."

Tapping on the chart-room door, she was met on the threshold by Captain Crawford, who had just been apprised of her arrival. Whatever curiosity he may have felt about his owner's long stay ashore, he was not the man to show it, though he certainly started a little at the request preferred to him. Marion, though she believed herself to have drawn the sting of the Americans, nevertheless felt a longing to put miles and miles of blue water between them and the yacht.

"Captain Crawford, I'm going to be a horrid nuisance to you," she began, with the pretty air that made all her people friends rather than dependents. "I want to get away from here to-night. Can it be done?"

"It shall be, if it is any way possible," replied Crawford gallantly in his best P. & O. manner. "If you will excuse me for a moment, I will cast the lead and see if there is enough water to cross the bar."

"I will come too," said Marion, accompanying him to the vessel's side.

In the meanwhile the tall, heavily-coated man who had come aboard with her had turned with strange unfamiliarity to the brilliantly-lit range of deck-houses in which were the main saloon and the state-rooms. He was hovering, half-reluctant, at

the white-and-gold vestibule of the range, when Crispin, who had heard of her mistress's tardy return, emerged, demure yet alert, from the saloon. Casting a curious but respectful glance at the tall figure, she stood aside for it to pass.

"I say, I'm a bit mixed to-night," he said in husky tones. "Clean out of my reckoning. Show us my cabin, like a good girl, and I shan't forget to be kind to you."

The maid wheeled round, and without a word led him into the saloon, the length of which they had to traverse before they reached the corridors, one on each side, in which were the state-rooms. The fireplace of the saloon was at the far end, and at it was seated Aunt Jane, loyal to Marion's motives, whatever they might be, but consumed with inquisitive ardour to learn the reason for her long absence on shore.

"Why, Leslie," she said, as the tall figure was striding past her without word or sign in the wake of Crispin, "what on earth have you and Marion been up to? You have run the truant down, I hear."

"Oh, it's you, is it, old cat," was the brutal reply, which left Aunt Jane gasping and Crispin unenlightened, for the latter had already passed into one of the corridors that ran out on either side of the fireplace and so had not heard the amazing insult. She opened the door of a handsomely-furnished cabin.

"That is your state-room, sir," said the maid, whose mean spirit could not soar beyond the surmise that her mistress's husband had, in her col-

loquial way of thought, been "having a drop too much." And she rejoiced greatly, promising herself early developments which should balance the account between herself and the kindly employer who had thwarted her latest act of treachery.

"Ah, and a snug crib, too," was the reply. "Now, my dear, just cut along to the steward and get me a bottle of brandy—stay, better make it two while you're about it."

Sure now that Mr. Armytage had spent his hours ashore in drinking, and delighted with her errand, Crispin went to procure fresh fuel to fan, as she hoped, the existing fire into a conflagration. In the pantry the steward made a wry face at her request, but he handed over the bottles.

"Never heard of such a thing on the *Idalia*," he said. "I am sorry if this is going to be the game, and so soon, too."

"So am I," replied the hypocrite. "But I couldn't well refuse, nor could you, till we have orders from the mistress not to supply him."

She hurried back to the state-room, entering the deck-structure at the other end so as not to pass through the saloon and so excite Aunt Jane's premature curiosity and possible interference. In her malevolence she wanted the gathering thunder-cloud to break sudden and unexpected over the young wife's head.

"Here is the brandy, sir," she said, putting the bottles down on the toilet-table. "Is there anything more I can get for you—a syphon of soda?"

"That's good enough for me," was the snarling answer, accompanied by a gesture to the jug on

the wash-stand. "Where does that door lead to?"

He was pointing to a door in the middle wall that divided the cabin from the next—Marion's, in fact. He must be very bad indeed, Crispin argued, to have forgotten that, but she supplied the information as civilly as if the question had been a perfectly natural one.

It was received with a sardonic raising of the eyebrows that almost brought compunction to the hard heart of the venal maid. This was not altogether like drunkenness—not ordinary drunkenness, at least, as she had known it in the sordid home that had bred her. There was a subtle expression of cruelty, too, which she had not noticed before in the handsome man whom she had been paid to deliver to his enemies.

With a wave of his hand he gave her to understand that she was to leave him, and she quitted the cabin, a little scared by what she had done.

Marion, having been assured by Captain Crawford that the yacht could put to sea immediately, instructed him to steam along the coast to the westward at half speed. It would be time enough to fix on the next port of call in the morning, and it would probably be the Scilly Isles or some place in Ireland. On leaving the captain she went into the saloon on her way to her cabin, expecting to be received by Aunt Jane with a host of questions and reproaches, instead of which she found the old lady sobbing quietly by the open grate.

"Why, aunty!" she cried. "Have you been so anxious as all that? It never crossed my mind

that you guessed there was any trouble. I went ashore to put things right, and I have done it—gloriously. Now that the worry is over, I'll tell you and Leslie all about it while we have some food—only it will have to be supper instead of dinner."

Never dreaming but that her solution of her aunt's tears was the right one, she stooped and kissed the woe-begone face and passed on into the corridor, where she found Crispin awaiting her at the door of her state-room.

"I shall not require you," she said shortly. "I was detained longer than I expected, and as it is so late I shall not dress to-night."

When the maid had retired, baffled in her desire to note developments, Marion flung off her seal-skin jacket and removed her hat. Then, having merely tidied her hair and washed her hands, she went and drummed a lively summons on the door communicating with her husband's cabin. She was so relieved from the tension of the last few days that she fell into slang—for very joy at having by her own unaided effort saved the dear one behind those beautiful greenheart panels from an undeserved peril.

"Now then, hurry up, Leslie, old boy," she called. "It's high time we had some grub. Don't trouble to dress to-night. I've such heaps and heaps to tell you."

There came no answer. She tried the door. It was bolted on the other side.

"Leslie!" she repeated. "Don't dress, I tell you. I am as hungry as a hunter, and Aunt Jane is dying for our excuses."

Still no answer. "Leslie!" she called again, this time in a lower tone, for she was beginning to be filled with a great wonder. The sound of movement reached her from the other cabin, and she knew that her appeal must have been heard. Her husband had never treated her in this fashion before. A dread that he had been taken ill seized her.

"Leslie!" she cried once more, rattling the door-handle.

And then came the shock, swift and violent as the lightning-blast. "Curse you, why do you call me by that name? Call me Nigel, you jade, or hold your silly tongue."

With a supreme effort Marion fought back the distress that swooped upon her with the vile words. Her husband's love was too precious to her to be lightly jeopardised by resentment at what might be a passing mood.

"Certainly I will call you Nigel, dear, if you wish it," she replied bravely. "Perhaps you are wise to wish it so, now that we are clear of Doctor Beaman's clutches. But do come out and have some food, or you will be really ill after all the worry I've caused you."

At this moment there was a tap at her state-room door—the outer one, leading from the corridor.

"Well, what is it?" she asked sharply, opening the door to encounter the bright eyes of Badger.

"Oh, it's you, Billy," she added in gentler tone.

"The steward sent me to say that supper is served, and would you be so good as to let him know what wine you——"

The boy's shrill treble, pitched high because the thud of the propeller had just commenced, was interrupted by a horrid chuckle from the cabin which Leslie Armytage had used as a dressing-room. "Don't trouble about any wine for me, kiddy," came the jeering shout from within. "I've got a couple of bottles of brandy in here, and am right for to-night, anyway. And, see here, my lady, if you're going to sup, don't forget to call me by my right name when you come back—Nigel—Nigel Lukyn, and no error."

White as a sheet, Marion went out into the corridor, shutting her own state-room door behind her in a vague desire to stop further revelations that should compromise her husband's good name. Badger's face reflected the agony in her own, and, though she was aware of the lad's devotion to herself, she could not fully understand his distress, till he murmured in an awe-stricken whisper—

"Nigel Lukyn, he said he was. That was the toff that behaved so bad to Sister Sue."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BITTEN FINGER-NAILS.

MARION started as though stung by the boy's disclosure. The scene on her marriage night, so recent in time, so distant by the happenings since, came flooding back to her memory with vivid force as she looked down at Badger's half-scared, half-angry face. The girl who had so nearly paid for her intrusion at Eyot Cottage with her life was, then, the "Sister Sue" of whom she had heard so much, and the poor wanderer had been mistaken in recanting her recognition of the man who had done her wrong.

All Marion's vision of happiness seemed to dissolve like a mirage under the dual shock of her husband's present behaviour and this discovery of his past misconduct. A combination of dignity and shame kept her from pressing the boy for details then; she wanted time to get used to the new state of things sprung so swiftly on her in the heyday of what she had believed was her triumph over the one cloud on her married life.

"I cannot understand it, Billy," she said sadly.

"I think that there must be some explanation, and it is your business to explain things, is it not? Perhaps you will be able to find one if you set your little brains to work. I cannot talk to you about it now."

In the saloon, while the under-steward and Badger waited on her, she made a pretence of eating, carrying on a scrappy conversation with Aunt Jane for the sake of appearances. The old lady had by no means recovered her equanimity, and Marion fully expected the outburst that followed the departure of the attendants.

"My own darling child, whatever does it mean?" she cried, her tears breaking out afresh. "I have never been so insulted in my life. He called me an old cat, and now he must be sulking in his cabin. What *does* it mean?"

"I don't know, dear," Marion replied wearily. "He was very rude to me, too, just now, but I put it down to worry at my being detained so long ashore. We must forgive him and be patient." Wild horses would not have dragged from her any allusion to Badger's revelation. Her load promised to be heavy indeed without that.

"It isn't forgiveness that's wanted," said Aunt Jane nodding her head sagely. "Women can always forgive, but this strikes me as a case for pity—sheer downright pity for Leslie, as you call him, and for me, and for you, poor darling, most of all."

"Why, aunty?" Marion asked, not seeing her drift.

"Simply that Mr. Nigel Lukyn has been as mad

as a hatter really all the time, and that you have married a raving lunatic. The judgment I formed when I first saw him, before he went to the asylum, was the right one. He is a nice-enough fellow in his lucid intervals, but he's had a relapse, and he'll always be having 'em—that's what's the matter with him."

Strangely enough, so firmly had Marion persuaded herself of Lukyn's sanity, that she had not thought of this explanation of her husband's conduct. It could not condone his treatment of Badger's sister, though it might mitigate her view of it if his mind had been unhinged at the time. Yet, if Aunt Jane was right, what an appalling prospect lay before herself. What a harvest she was to reap from that patient seed-time at Quayne's window in quest of a "double" to take this man's place. She would be tied forever to a maniac whose escape she had herself arranged with open eyes. In the world that had known her the ridicule for her action would never die.

She could brave that, however, better than the shattering of the happiness that had been so short-lived. The remembrance of those few sweet days with "Leslie," as she still thought of him, would be all that was left to her of her romantic day-dream. She would have to exist through the rest of her days practically widowed almost as soon as she was a wife. And only eight hours before he had been walking at her side on the bridge-deck, apparently as sane and affectionate as he had been on the day her heart had gone out to him after his flight from Grey Gables.

No, it could not be—this hideous thing that threatened her. It was too stern a punishment for Providence to inflict on a woman who, if she had erred in what she had done, had wronged no one but herself. She would cling to the hope that "Leslie" was only ill with cold and fatigue, and that he was not the culprit of the "Sister Sue" tragedy. By some almost incredible freak of fortune, Armytage—the real one, now fulfilling his compact at the asylum—must have taken the name of the man he was afterwards engaged to personate, and have called himself Nigel Lukyn in his dealings with the girl.

"No, aunty," said Marion, shaking off the lethargy of sorrow into which the old lady's theory had plunged her, "I refuse to accept that view—yet, at any rate. So will your dear kind heart, when you see what it would mean for me. He is tired and unwell, and we must make allowances. At least, *I* must; that is a wife's province."

Marion, after a vain attempt to eat, had left the saloon-table and had buried her fair young head in her relative's ample lap, and the shapely, comfortable hands were stroking the brown hair lovingly. There was a world of sympathy in Aunt Jane's touch, yet her reply was startling in its irrelevance. Did she change the subject in order to follow up a new train of ideas?

"The yacht is moving," she said. "What is the reason for that?"

Marion was on the point of revealing the history

of her doings on shore, of the danger that had hung over them from the Americans, and of her successful diplomacy, but she checked the impulse in time. Aunt Jane was not in the mood to see eye to eye with her in that matter. She would, after being called "an old cat," probably refuse to believe that "Leslie" was not the treacherous spy who had incurred the vengeance of the Knights of Industry.

So Marion replied: "Yes, dear; as I told you, I went ashore to put right a little mistake that had occurred, and I have done so most satisfactorily. It isn't worth mentioning now, though when I saw you crying I thought that you had guessed it and been very anxious. As that matter is finished I wanted to be off and away from a rather unpleasant scene. Now, what do you say to bed as a remedy for——"

She was interrupted by the entrance of Badger, who, in his blue uniform and brass buttons, made the picture of a smart yacht's boy. He advanced towards them, all traces of his recent excitement gone. He came in from the corridor in which was the sleeping accommodation, and made straight for a cabinet in which cigars were kept.

"The master rung his bell and sent me for some cigars, ma'am," he explained as he passed the ladies. "Strong ones, he wanted."

"Didn't he give you the name of the cigar?" said Aunt Jane, sitting up suddenly very erect.

"No, ma'am," the boy replied, eyeing her with swift interest.

"Humph! he has puffed enough tobacco the last few days to know his favourite brand. I even know it myself," said Aunt Jane, rising heavily and going to the handsome inlaid piece of furniture. "Here you are—Flor de Cuba Estramadura—take him some of those." And stooping to the boy's ear, she whispered: "See if his finger-nails are bitten when you hand them to him, and come back and tell me quietly."

A grimace in Marion's direction hinted that she was not to be taken into confidence, but Badger, as he sped away, gave no outward and visible sign of having heard the injunction, and this for the excellent reason that he was not at all sure that he meant to obey it. He regarded himself as in Marion's service alone, and though his observations of Aunt Jane had convinced him of that lady's loyalty to her niece, he hardly felt justified in working, as it were, behind his employer's back. But he would not fail to notice the detail inquired for. There could be no harm in that. The knowledge might come in useful in some way that he could not at present guess, and he blamed himself for not having acquired it already. He had had every opportunity of observing the finger-nails of Mr. Armytage, or, as he now called himself, Mr. Nigel Lukyn, during the past few days.

However, he would now rectify the omission. He tapped at the dressing-room door and eagerly scrutinised the hand stretched forth to take the cigars.

The nails were bitten to the quick.

On the whole, the boy decided that he would not impart the information to Miss Middleton that night. Those finger-nails, and Aunt Jane's interest in them, had set his youthful brain to work on a problem which he wanted time to consider in all its bearings before he shared it with anyone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW NIGEL LUKYN RAN AMUCK.

AUNT JANE's reason for being inquisitive about the finger-nails was far less subtle than the one attributed to her by Badger. As a matter of fact, she had not the knowledge necessary to the formation of the theory now calling all the youthful detective's faculties into play. She had been aware that her niece's husband at lunch that day, and subsequently when he had talked with her in the saloon, had possessed nails as neat and trim as though manicured the day before. If he had bitten them down during the afternoon, and reduced them to the condition of his ante-asylum days, it would be clear proof, Aunt Jane argued, that he had "gone mad" again.

In which case, she meant to assert her old authority, such as it had been, and insist on Marion occupying some other state-room that night, or, better still, sharing her own. It would be terrible to think of her as at the mercy of a young husband who, even if she bolted him into his dressing-room, might keep her awake all night.

But, as Badger did not return, and it was past her usual bed-time, Aunt Jane retired to her own state-room, which was in the opposite corridor to Marion's, on the port side of the vessel. Not wishing to alarm Marion, she said nothing of her fears, only kissing her good-night with rather more than her usual effusion.

The result was the same as if she had gained the grounds she sought for, suggesting that Marion should sleep with her. She had not been in her cabin ten minutes when Marion appeared at the door, very white of face but quite self-possessed.

"I must ask for your hospitality to-night, aunty," she said, tossing her night-gown case into the second berth. "He is really rather more than I can stand. He has locked himself into his dressing-room, and he began to use the most horrible language at me through the door."

So the two ladies slept in Aunt Jane's state-room, trying to comfort each other, but failing utterly. And their counsels were divided, for the elder woman was for putting back to Exmouth, or into the nearest port, in the morning, and telegraphing to Doctor Beaman to come and reclaim his patient, while the younger, ashamed to publish her part in her husband's escape, was for pushing on—out to sea—into the Atlantic—anywhere where she could hide her trouble as long as possible from a world that would only laugh.

In the morning the rumour that "Mr. Armytage" was raving mad, or drunk, or both, had run through the yacht like wild-fire. All night long he had been heard singing and shouting by the watch on

deck, and he had threatened to kill the under-steward who had knocked at his door with shaving water, refusing the man admission. Then it leaked out that the beloved owner of the *Idalia* had been compelled to take refuge in her aunt's state-room, and it required all Captain Crawford's firmness to keep the crew in order.

The men went about muttering of a general assault on the dressing-room door, from which foul oaths were hurled at anyone who approached it. Only consideration for Marion prevented a breach of discipline, and she herself set an example of composure by affecting to ignore the fearsome noises in the starboard corridor. She breakfasted with Aunt Jane, as usual, in the saloon, and afterwards went on deck, wearing a fine air of unconcern which imposed on no one.

With the instinct of a gentleman, Captain Crawford left it to her to make the first reference to her husband's behaviour, and as she made none at all he confined his conversation to ordinary topics. There was, however, a shade of significance in his tone when he inquired on what course Marion wished the yacht to be steered.

In the numbing agony of her trouble she had not thought any more about it, but her impulse was the same as last night—not to put in anywhere, but to cruise in the open sea, in the hope that the present horror might pass. Glancing at the coast line, she recognised the familiar landmark of the Gribbon Tower on the Cornish coast.

"How is the weather for a run out into the Western Ocean?" she asked.

"Couldn't be better; glass high and steady—good for three or four days of this quiet frosty snap," Crawford admitted reluctantly. He had hoped that his owner, in present circumstances, would run into port and obtain medical advice for her husband. He did not contemplate with pleasure a trip of some days with a yelling, foul-mouthed lunatic on board, whom he could not, much as he longed to, clap into irons.

"Then that is what we will do," said Marion, and then she hesitated for a moment, gazing up at the Marconi column that projected a couple of feet above the mast to which it was fixed, running down to the receiving and transmitting apparatus in the chart room.

"But I don't want to go beyond the limits of wireless communication with the shore," she added thoughtfully, and with a pathetic catch in her voice so suggestive of a sob that it was a half-confidence.

"I understand," the captain answered gravely, accepting the situation with infinite tact. What he understood was that Marion might at any moment feel the necessity of making arrangements for the proper reception of her husband whenever she might be constrained to return. And more than all he understood her desire for the secrecy of the sea to hide a sorrow which she was trusting to a few days' respite to cure.

They had been standing at the foot of the bridge ladder, and Crawford, perceiving that his employer had completed her instructions, raised his cap and swung up the steps to his post. Marion walked

further aft, and leaned over the rails, trying to drown her misery in enjoyment of the glorious seascape. The sun shone with a frosty glitter, and the gentle wavelets sparkled in a fine-weather ripple, while a mile away the towering headland crowned by the ancient landmark stood out in all its lofty grandeur.

Suddenly an insane screech drew her eyes from the restful scene to the vestibule of the saloon, and what she saw there told her that she was in dire and instant danger. The man whom she believed to be her husband, in reality the former occupant of Doctor Beaman's refractory ward, stood just outside the entrance, regarding her with the ferocious countenance and crouching attitude of a wild beast about to spring. And he made his rush so quickly that but for her presence of mind he would have reached her before Crawford from the bridge and the watch on deck could have come to her assistance.

The maniac was brandishing the rail of a smashed towel-horse, and as he raced along the deck there could be no doubt of his intention. Barefooted, and in his shirt sleeves, he bounded forward, emitting strange noises. Marion turned to fly, and instinctively darted into the chart room, trying to close the door behind her. But it stuck, and there being another door opposite she ran through to it and so out on to the other side of the deck, getting clear just as Lukyn entered by the door she had failed to close. With the second door she was more fortunate, and slammed it in the inflamed face of her pursuer in the nick of time.

There was a bolt on the outside, and as she shot it home she knew that she was safe. For a dozen of her faithful crew had gathered round her, while others, with Crawford at their head, went round to the open door to secure the madman.

The captain knew that it was time for him to act as his owner's friend rather than as her servant. He issued a curt order, which resulted in the berserk fury which was wrecking the chart room being quelled by main force, and in the struggling, blaspheming wretch being "frog's-marched" by a quartette of stalwart sailors to a sail-room on the lower deck, where he was locked in and a guard set over the door.

A little later Crawford entered the saloon, where Marion was quietly sobbing, with her head on Aunt Jane's knee. With a supreme effort of self-control she rose to receive the captain's report. But first she asked—

"You have been gentle with him, Captain Crawford, I trust? This is all—all due to ill-health, and he will be so sorry soon."

Now the good skipper was very angry, for having heard from the head steward of the two bottles of brandy, he thought he knew that kind of ill-health. And one of his pet contrivances that made this an ideal yacht was in fragments on the chart-room floor.

"Oh, *he's* all right, and being well looked after," the captain replied grimly. "We treated him like a naughty boy, and shall keep at that till he gets good again. A British shipmaster has his

rights, even if he is only a brass-buttoned flunkey on a sea-going mansion."

"What has he done, Captain Crawford?" Marion demanded, and there was no rebuke in her voice. She was abased, ashamed, and miserable, but glad of the implied, if rugged, sympathy.

"What has he done!" repeated the captain with savage emphasis. "Why, he's smashed the Marconi apparatus into little pieces. It is scattered over the chart-room floor—receiver, transmitter, and all. A matter of five hundred pounds, Miss Armytage, to repair and a fortnight needed to do it in."

John Quayne, at that moment speeding westward in the Cornish express, with his knowledge of what was fixed to the *Idalia's* stern-post, would have deemed it a matter of considerably more than that.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SCHEMING TO DIE.

WHEN Leslie Armytage quitted the house in Holroyd Street, Exmouth, an hour after midnight, his mind, as he walked back to the hotel, was chiefly exercised on how to deceive Quayne. He meant to treat his intending murderers with absolute good faith. They had put it in his power to save the *Idalia*, and trusted him in return to deliver himself into their hands. Their confidence should not be misplaced; he would be at West Down Beacon the following night, ready to yield up his life; and he would use all his ingenuity to throw the detective off the scent of the bargain he had struck.

He was still under the influence of a strange exultation, and felt real pleasure at the prospect of making atonement to Marion by suffering death that she might live. In his humility it never occurred to him that life might not be worth much to her without him to share it.

He hoped that Quayne had not sat up for him, so that he might have more time to formulate a

scheme for his deception. But in this he was disappointed. Late as it was, he found the celebrated detective fully dressed and eagerly awaiting him in his bedroom.

"I have got what I wanted out of them," said Leslie, as he closed the door and came to the fire, shivering slightly. "There is a powerful infernal machine fixed to the yacht's stern-post a foot below the water-line. It is timed to go off at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

"Thank God for the knowledge," said Quayne simply. "I will be off to Poldhu by the first train and get into wireless communication with the yacht long before four o'clock."

He made a rapid calculation, and added—

"The *Idalia*, if she has continued her voyage to the westward, should be somewhere between Falmouth and the Scilly Isles to-morrow at noon. She will probably put into Falmouth after getting the message."

"Unless Lukyn's behaviour has compelled my wife to run in somewhere nearer—at Torquay or Plymouth," Leslie suggested.

"That is possible," Quayne admitted. "I shall provide against any such contingency before starting for the Marconi station. But the chances are that Falmouth will be the port, and you had better come with me as far as Truro and go on thence to Falmouth alone, so as to put the Lukyn muddle right at the earliest possible moment. You owe it to Mrs. Armytage to do that."

"I know," said Leslie, shuddering at the thought of what might be passing on the yacht. "But

you forget that after what I've done to-night I am more than ever a hunted man. I gained that information as Nigel Lukyn, and because I was the Nigel Lukyn whom they believed to have sailed in the *Idalia*. They only refrained from killing me to-night for the same reason that they spared you—that they would almost certainly be caught after a crime in that dirty little lodging house."

"Well?" said Quayne sharply.

"I must run away—efface myself—or they will have me. I share the opinion you expressed earlier in the evening about these Knights of Industry. They are so smooth and civil that they inspire a creepy feeling that is worse than fear, Quayne. Yes, I must put a hundred miles between them and myself before noon to-morrow."

"Where would you be safer than with me?" said Quayne. "My reputation counts for something—more than it is worth, no doubt, but they would not be likely to attack you in my company."

"You forget that your plan entails my going to Falmouth and your going to Poldhu," Leslie persisted. "After we had separated at Truro my life would not be worth an hour's purchase. No, I shall make for London—the only place where one can lose one's self—and await developments."

"And what about your wife and Lukyn? How do you propose to sort yourself out?" Quayne demanded almost angrily.

"I leave that to you," Leslie replied. "Make my full confession to her for me as soon as you get the chance. The terror of these American

assassins has got into my very bones. I must be out of this and away as soon as the hotel is opened."

Quayne's impassive features showed no surprise. He slightly changed his position on the bed, on which he had been sitting, and Leslie, watching him anxiously, thought he discerned a shrug which might betoken contempt. He hoped it did. It was the mental attitude which he wished to inspire.

"Yes," said Quayne, lighting a cigarette, "I shall certainly get you sorted out with Lukyn, as you call it, at the earliest moment, though it would come better from yourself. I shall do it, in fact, in my wireless message to the yacht tomorrow from Poldhu. But you are forgetting, I think, that your personal danger will be very limited in point of time. Directly we get the *Idalia* home with evidence of the infernal machine, we can call in the police and lock the culprits up."

"You *can* do so, but I don't think you will," Leslie replied significantly. "At least, unless the catastrophe overtakes the yacht before you can stop it. My wife is your client, and you will hardly want to make public an affair so closely affecting her."

"Perhaps not," Quayne assented in a casual tone, but watching the other very narrowly now out of the corner of his eye. "But there will be another way of protecting you—as soon as Lukyn is safe back in the asylum. Mademoiselle Roumier and her friends can be enlightened as to which of you two 'doubles' is which. They will then

transfer their attention from you to the real object of their vengeance."

"Yes, that could be done," Leslie agreed, though, strive as he would, he could not infuse much relief into his voice. He knew that long before Nigel Lukyn could be restored to the security of Grey Gables, he himself would have fulfilled his compact and met his vicarious doom.

"In fact," Quayne continued, as if thinking aloud, "I don't see why the Americans shouldn't be told the truth before I start for Poldhu. The terror would be automatically removed from you at once then."

For a man under the influence of mortal dread, Leslie committed a glaring inconsistency which he instantly regretted, such a gleam did it call up in the detective's eye. "On no account must you do that," he said with great earnestness. And then, perceiving his error, he floundered for a moment, and by good luck stumbled on what seemed an adequate reason.

"You must not do that," he added, "because wherever the yacht puts in there would those murderers be, ready to rectify their failure. I cannot have my wife personally alarmed by any further deviltries of the gang. No, they must not be informed till Lukyn is clear of all association with her."

"I take your point," replied Quayne gravely, "and it has much to be said for it. Well, in that case, Mr. Armytage, there is nothing for it but that you should bear your cross a little longer; only, if you are bent on running away, I should

be glad if you would confide in me where you mean to run to, so that you may be apprised when the danger is past."

The last words were spoken with a contemptuous accent that persuaded Leslie that the battle was won. He believed that he had hoodwinked the great detective, and was free to go away and die. He had saved Marion, and by the time the yacht was brought safely to port by Marconi's wonderful invention he would have expiated his fault. He answered almost gaily—

"The line a hard-pressed fox will take must depend very much on the hounds. I don't see that I can give you an address, as I have no 'earth' to make for. I may try and lose myself in London. Say the Charing Cross post-office."

"So be it," said Quayne shortly. "And now we had better sleep a little."

But when the younger man, all too willing, had left to go to his room next door, the detective sat for a while, staring into the dying embers.

"Complex!" he muttered, as he rose at last. "He has sold himself to the devil in the shape of Berthe Roumier, and he is hiding the price. Well, if the redoubtable Signor Marconi will enable me to talk to the *Idalia* to-morrow, fairly early in the day, I may pull the poor fellow through."

CHAPTER XXX.

"NO REPLY."

IN the morning Quayne was up betimes, and, after a hurried breakfast in the coffee-room of the hotel, held a short interview with the ancient "shadow," Peckthorne. When he had given the old man a few verbal instructions and handed him a sheaf of telegrams for dispatch, he dismissed him, but called him back as though from an afterthought.

"Run up to No. 16—Mr. Armytage's room," he said. "Tell him I sent you, and ask if you can be of any use in procuring the disguise he spoke of."

Peckthorne was back in a couple of minutes, with the information that Mr. Armytage had paid for his room and left the hotel.

Quayne bit his lip and drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the table. The news somewhat disconcerted him, for he had formed the perfectly correct theory the night before that Leslie was trying to throw dust in his eyes, and did not intend to run away at all. In fact, the detective had felt certain that the young man had entered into

some compact with the Americans—had made some promise—which would entail his visiting or seeing them again. This early departure tended to shake, though not entirely to destroy, that view.

"Then there is nothing more to be done, Peckthorne, but to watch the people at Holroyd Street and inform me by telegram to Poldhu at noon if they have made any move," said Quayne rising. "Stay, I shall have to change at Exeter. Let me have a wire at the station there to say if they are still at their lodgings. As Armytage has gone they may have gone too."

Five minutes later Quayne was in the train on the first stage of his journey to the far west. He was restless and uneasy, for he blamed himself for losing touch with Leslie. He had intended to instruct Peckthorne to look after him, and he had been so sure that the threatened disguise and flight was only a blind that he had not taken quite adequate precautions. He ought to have taken Leslie at his word, in which case he would have kept an eye on him himself till Peckthorne arrived at the hotel.

When the local train set him down at Exeter he ran into the telegraph office and found the telegram from Peckthorne at Exmouth just being taken off the wires. To some extent it was reassuring. The Americans were still at Holroyd Street and showed no signs of making a move.

But after Quayne had taken his seat in the Cornish express, and turned the matter over and inside

out in that clever brain of his, he was not wholly comforted. Roumier and Company's inactivity might very well betoken the correctness of his first theory—of an understanding between them and Armytage which had made excursions and alarms unnecessary.

Quayne was principally concerned for his client, Marion, and he was not a little worried by his inability to surmise what that understanding could be. He could not disguise from himself the fact that Leslie, for all his personal liking for the ex-officer, had deceived his wife once, and that he might be doing it again—to her detriment, and for his own salvation. He might even have lied about his reluctance to have her frightened by the Americans, and have schemed to put them on to Lukyn instead of himself. In exchange for the information about the infernal machine he might have promised to join his wife on the arrival of the yacht in port, trusting to luck and ingenuity to trail them after the wretched madman when he came ashore.

More important, however, than the fate of Leslie was the warning of the *Idalia* against the explosive screwed to her stern, and though naturally anxious till it had been accomplished, Quayne was tolerably easy on that score. He would arrive at Poldhu at noon—four hours before the contrivance was timed to go off—and only some unforeseen chance, such as an accident to himself or the train in which he was travelling, could prevent the warning being given.

That the peril of the yacht was a very real one

Quayne had no doubt, for people do not accuse themselves of such a dastard crime for pastime. And he could not but admire Leslie's pluck in obtaining the information, for, whatever his later relations with the conspirators, he must have known that he entered the house in Holroyd Street with his life hanging by a thread. He gave him full credit for encountering the risk from a genuine desire to sacrifice himself for his wife.

"Yet the inconsistency of the fellow is maddening," the detective muttered as he shifted impatiently in his corner. "Brave as a lion one minute, and in a blue funk the next. Though I could have sworn he was shamming his dread last night, but for his bolting this morning."

But, try as he would, he could not reconcile Leslie's flight with any purpose other than escape from the American avengers, modified as this view was by the continuance of the latter at their lodgings. The inactivity of such tireless sleuth-hounds, who might have been expected to follow their quarry the moment he broke cover, was the paradox that gave Quayne such an uncomfortable journey.

He was quite glad when the time for action came and the conveyance from the station set him down at the gate of the enclosure surrounding Signor Marconi's huge talking apparatus. He glanced up at the gigantic lattice masts with their mysterious finials capable of projecting human thought across three thousand miles of sea, picturing to himself the consternation, followed with wild relief, that would prevail on board the

Idalia when the electric wave struck the yacht's recorder.

Having had occasion to bespeak an Atlantic liner in mid-ocean in the matter of an escaping jewel-thief, he was known to one of the principal officials. This gentleman received the eminent detective courteously, and at once conducted him to the operating-room, where he handed him over to the operator in charge of the short distance instrument.

"This is Mr. Quayne, whom we were able to assist in the recovery of the Ormathwaite diamonds," said the official. "He wants to speak the yacht *Idalia*, which is cruising somewhere within four hundred miles. Mr. Quayne is probably on the track of some more wrong 'uns," added the official with a laugh, and moved by a pardonable curiosity he lingered in the doorway to hear the message.

"Yes, there are wrong 'uns in it, but they are not on board the yacht," was Quayne's answer. "My message, as I shall dictate it, will explain itself, but first call up the *Idalia*, please. Say, 'Are you there?' or whatever is the formula on your marine telephone."

The operator smiled and busied himself with the instrument, bending over the delicate mechanism of the recorder to watch for results. There was dead silence in the business-like chamber, except for the sigh of the west wind that swept over the Cornish headland, making strange music in the wires on the masts outside.

Two minutes passed. The principal shifted a leg in the doorway, and Quayne laughed nervously

"Too far off for you, eh?" he said. "Too much wind about, or something of the sort, I suppose."

The executive officers of the great Italian could afford to make allowances. They could see that the detective was labouring under a great strain.

"Try again," said the chief to the subordinate.

The nimble fingers dealt with the transmitting mechanism once more, and once more the keen eyes watched the recorder. Quayne stood like a statue, rigid and motionless, except for his upper lip, which was caught and worried by his lower teeth.

There was a longer pause this time, and then the operator turned and shook his head at his superior officer. It was the latter who spoke.

"It is no go, Mr. Quayne, I am afraid," he said. "You must have been misinformed as to the locality of the *Idalia*. If she is anywhere within a thousand miles of us she must be at the bottom of the sea."

Quayne reeled slightly, wiping a dank brow. The only conclusion he could come to was that the infernal machine had exploded prematurely. His failure to protect his client hit him hard.

"Yes, it is serious, but I cannot explain," he said in reply to the questioning glances of the two. "I must get back to the railway as fast as I can."

At the station he asked for telegrams, but only found one awaiting him. It was from Peckthorne, at Exmouth, and had been handed in a little before noon. It informed him that Berthe Roumier

and her companions were still at Holroyd Street, and had so far not left the house at all.

But it was the telegram which he did *not* receive that mattered most. He had wired to the harbour-masters of all the western ports to apprise him by telegram if the *Idalia* put in, but his request had brought no reply—only the same ominous silence which the Marconigraph had received.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

ELUDING A SHADOW.

"YES, he is still there," said Scorrier Voules in answer to a question from Berthe Roumier. "He just dodders up and down, cocking his eye this way, same as he's been doing all the morning."

The speaker stood behind the window curtain of the front room at the Exmouth lodging-house. His confederates sat back, well out of sight.

Early in the day the trio had become alive to the presence of the old man Peckthorne in the street, and it had not taken them long to guess that they were the objects of his unobtrusive sentry-go. That he was a spy in the employment of Quayne they were all agreed, but they were divided in their opinions of the significance of his watchfulness.

Fayter Frayne, with his customary morose pessimism, persisted that it was due to "Nigel Lukyn's" treachery—that they had been fools to trust a man of notorious bad faith, who had no sooner gained the information about the infernal

machine than he had taken steps to enlist Quayne's protection.

Berthe Roumier and Voules did not share that view. With a more subtle diagnosis of Leslie's character, they gave him credit for an intention to abide by his bargain, and they quite correctly attributed Peckthorne's vigilance to Quayne's initiative. The detective, they argued, would not want to lose sight of them in any case, but certainly not till after his journey to the Marconi station had assured the safety of the *Idalia*.

All the same, the activity of the wizened ancient who had hovered round them all the morning was beginning to be irksome, and threatened to be a real obstacle to their keeping the deadly tryst which they had arranged on the cliffs that night. They did not want a witness, however senile and feeble, for that might entail more bloodshed, and these enthusiasts had no quarrel with mankind at large. But they were very much in earnest about reckoning with Nigel Lukyn.

They were conscious of much energy wasted—of being thwarted by a combination of circumstances rather than individuals—and with success in sight at last they did not mean to be baulked in their supreme effort.

"He is still there?" Berthe repeated after an interval. She looked very dainty and out of place in the dingy room that was odorously reminiscent of relays of cheap summer visitors.

"Oh, yes—still on the prowl," was the report from the window.

"Well, we have got to shake him off before

it gets dark," said Berthe decidedly. "We have brains for that among the three of us, I think."

"I'll go out and throw him into the sea if you give the word," suggested Frayne gloomily.

The others laughed. "He wouldn't drown. He's too thin," said Voules in the tone that always annoyed his colleague into muttering savagely.

"What's *your* plan, Scorrier?" Berthe asked with a yawn that presupposed a futile reply. "We cannot have our plans upset by that dilapidated scarecrow trailing us to our *rendezvous* with Lukyn. We don't want to hurt the old chap, but we must be rid of him before it is too dark to see what he is up to."

"I have some tabloids in my bag that would send him to sleep for four-and-twenty hours if I could induce him to accompany me to the bar of a public-house," said Voules. "But if he is one of Quayne's men the chances are that he wouldn't respond to the invitation."

"Silly!" was Berthe's curt dismissal of the idea. She walked to the window and, ensconcing herself behind the lace curtains, waited till the shambling figure passed again. Then, from her concealment, she scanned the parchment features of the "shadow" intently. Peckthorne looked as though he were half starved, which was not the case. Being a top-sawyer at his peculiar craft, he was very well paid, drawing five pounds a week and what he called his "exes."

"That is a clever old man to have to shunt," said Berthe when he had gone by. "But I do not think that he is clever enough to follow three people,

all going in different directions, at once. He will follow one very tenaciously, though, and what we have to do is to arrange that the two who are *not* followed keep the appointment with Lukyn."

"You will be the one to be shadowed," said Voules confidently.

"Why so sure?" demanded Berthe, elevating her finely-pencilled brows.

"Because Quayne will have ascertained that this particular hive is bossed by the queen bee," was the reply. "I am open to bet that the old boy yonder has instructions to stick to the brains of the party—if we separate."

Berthe bowed with mock ceremony, but she remained sunk in deep thought. "On the whole I think that we shall find that you are right, Scorrier," she said at last. "And if I do prove to be the recipient of that antique specimen's attention the mere fact will point to Lukyn's good faith—for this reason: if Lukyn has sought Quayne's protection against imminent violence, instead of throwing him off the scent according to bargain, it will be you two able-bodied men who will be cheviéd about. Come, let us put it to the proof—like this."

And she proceeded tersely to sketch out her plan. Fayter Frayne was to leave the house first and make his way to the rail way station, where he was to sit in the waiting-room, or lounge at the bookstall. Voules was to go out half an hour later, walk two miles into the country in any direction he chose, and then return and join Frayne at the station. If neither of them had seen signs

of the "shadow" they would book by the first train to Littleham, the next station, which was not far from the *rendezvous* with Lukyn on the cliff. On the other hand, if the old man turned up on their tracks they would take tickets for Exeter, and play about there, keeping the "shadow" busy.

"But in that case Lukyn will go scot free—provided he turns up at the appointed time and place," grumbled Frayne.

"You forget *me*," said Berthe significantly, with a tightening of her red lips. "If you two were amusing the shadow at Exeter I should be at liberty to meet Lukyn alone. I am not afraid. If he goes to the West Down Beacon at all it will prove him to be on the square, and I shall know that according to his promise he is unarmed. I shall shoot him and rejoin you as soon as possible, either in England or America. The risk will be small. In that lonely place the body will probably not be found for days."

The two men received the startling announcement differently. Voules' fine-cut features expressed a pained distress, but Frayne laughed brutal approval. Yet the aim which was keeping these curiously assorted people together was identical, and no dissentient voice was raised at the grim proposal from the girl, in whose delicate personality there was no hint of grimness.

Two points remained to be settled—the first being where the three were to meet in the probable event of the male members being left unwatched and therefore having to act as executioners. It

was finally decided that Voules and Frayne, who as the actual murderers would be in the greatest danger, should make for Liverpool or Southampton and return to America, leaving Berthe to follow independently when she had shaken off Quayne's assistant.

The second point for decision was the course to be pursued if the intended victim failed to keep his promise. On that they were unanimous, that they would all remain in England, find Lukyn again, and hunt him down till they had accomplished their purpose. Even after the attempted outrage on the yacht they might feel tolerably secure, they argued, owing to Marion's reluctance to make public the circumstance of her marriage.

Their only danger seemed very remote. It lay in the infernal machine exploding in spite of Quayne's exertions, in which case there would be an end of secrecy and the detective would tell what he knew to the authorities.

"Now go, Fayter, and luck be with you," said Berthe.

Berthe and Voules stood at the window and watched their comrade as he wended his way along the street. Half way up it he met Peckthorne, who in passing almost brushed his shoulder. The old man scarcely gave him a glance, but continued to shuffle towards the house, which he passed with his eye, as usual, cocked at the window. Berthe chatted to her companion till the pre-arranged interval had elapsed, and then Voules departed, to be watched in turn by the sole remaining delegate.

Retaining her position at the window, she saw the tall figure with the sloping shoulders slouch lazily to the end of the street, drawing no more attention upon himself from Peckthorne than Frayne had done. Berthe breathed a sigh of relief and began to prepare for her own departure.

"It is man's work, and it is right that it should be done by men," she murmured, throwing a few things into a hand-bag, for she did not know whether she should return. The apartments had been paid for a week in advance, so there was no need to interview the landlady. After spending a few minutes over the adjustment of her hat she went out of the front door and looked leisurely up and down the road. Peckthorne had his back to her, going to the right. Berthe turned to the left, walking quickly. Before she had gone twenty paces she flung a glance over her shoulder. The lean little man was ambling hard on her heels.

"He must have eyes in the back of his head," she smiled to herself. "Well, I am going to astonish the old gentleman considerably. I shall make him sit up and wonder if he has mistaken his vocation."

She walked on briskly, with the graceful poise and easy carriage that seemed to invite rather than avoid attention, directing her steps to the centre of the town. Once or twice she assured herself without apparent effort that the old man was still trotting patiently behind, and then, having reached her goal, she marched with calm self-possession into the police-station.

The sergeant at the desk received the fashion-

ably-attired young lady with a mournful sympathy, due to the woe-begone expression of her face. Mademoiselle Roumier, while inwardly chuckling at the bewilderment of her "shadow" outside, looked as if she had lost her all.

"Yes, miss, yes—a gold watch set with turquoises and diamonds—might have been dropped on the esplanade—possibly stolen from the pocket," repeated the polite officer, writing down the particulars of her imaginary loss.

And, being a gallant man with an eye for the sex, he fell into the net and spun out the time during which Berthe remained in the office to a long quarter of an hour, so that the ancient Peckthorne, shivering on the pavement, wondered if his employers had not bungled matters for once.

He was not in the habit of being set to watch persons who had such intimate relations and lengthy business with the police.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BADGER THROWS LIGHT.

WHEN Marion heard of the wanton destruction of the Marconi apparatus in the chart-room she was compelled to admit sorrowfully that Captain Crawford had done the right thing in placing the culprit in confinement. The safety of others as well as his own demanded it.

Seeing how acutely the young wife felt her humiliating position, and anxious to restore discipline on deck, the captain left her to the ministrations of Aunt Jane, whose soothing tenderness was of but little avail against a grief that threatened to be life-long.

Marion's sobs having at length grown less frequent, the old lady, without saying anything to her niece, stretched out a plump finger and pressed the electric bell communicating with the pantry. It was answered by Badger—the very person she desired to see. The lad's face was a picture of indignant sympathy blended with an eagerness to impart something.

"You didn't come back last night, boy, to tell

me what I asked you to find out," said Aunt Jane with asperity. "If you had done so all this unpleasantness might have been avoided."

"What was that, aunt?" Marion inquired quickly, keen to clutch at any straw. If a vague "something" could have prevented her unhappiness last night, the same something might mitigate her trouble now.

Badger hung his head under the reproof, but immediately raised it and looked the two ladies frankly in the face while Aunt Jane answered: "I ordered him to notice his—Nigel's, Leslie's, whatever you call him—finger-nails. I wanted, if I could get guidance that way, to take precautions after his strange behaviour."

"The finger-nails were bitten, ma'am, right down short," Badger replied. "I didn't tell you last night because—well, because there was something else to tell, if what you were thinking of was correct."

"Thinking of? Drat the boy. How does he know what I was thinking of?" exclaimed Aunt Jane angrily. She was of the old school, and bitterly resented having her thoughts diagnosed by one whom she regarded as an impudent page-boy. "All I had in my mind was," she added, turning to Marion, "that your husband's nails were trim and neat after lunch, and that if they were bitten at night he would require looking after. It is a bad sign."

Badger smiled superior, for Marion, through her tears, nodded to him reassuringly. "What was the other 'something' there was to tell,

Billy?" she asked, little guessing the tremendous issue behind her simple question.

"That there's two of 'em," Badger answered eagerly, "and that this one we've got aboard now ain't the one that came aboard when we started—him that went ashore at Exmouth yesterday afternoon to look for you."

Marion had been crouching against the sofa, with her elbow on her aunt's knee. At the boy's statement she rose slowly and looked at him with dilating eyes. To Aunt Jane, who was in the dark about her niece's mix-up of Doctor Beaman's inmates, it was all so much gibberish—the prattle of a stupid boy. Not so to the woman most interested.

"Why do you think that, Billy?" Marion said quietly. And turning to the old lady she remarked in an audible aside: "I have had worries that you do not know of. I had to employ detectives, and this is one of them."

Badger was on his mettle then, as she who was clutching at straws designed him to be in that subtle flattery. To be classed as "one of them"—as a real full-fledged detective—was a compliment that loosed the flood-gates of his speech. And with his inborn Cockney cleverness he seized the compliment as a weapon in his own defence.

"Yes," he said, with the sententious pride in his "profession" that had drawn many a smile from Marion while sitting at the window in the Strand, "but the best of us make mistakes sometimes. I ought to have reported that I saw a gentleman on the quay at Southampton exactly

like Mr. Armytage, and that I showed him your telegram to my governor saying we were bound for Exmouth. You couldn't have told t'other from which."

"Go on," said Marion hoarsely.

And Badger went on, describing how he had been accosted, as he thought, by Mr. Armytage, had acceded to his request for a glimpse of the telegram, and had then, after his brief absence, been surprised to find on his return to the yacht that Mr. Armytage was in evening dress at the dinner-table, where he had made considerable progress with the meal.

"There wasn't time for him to have changed into swallow-tails since I'd showed him the form," Badger continued, "and I was frightened. I was pretty near certain that I'd given the contents of that telegram away to the wrong man, so I said nothing, hoping that there'd be no harm done. I didn't blame myself over much, t'other one being the fack-simly of the gent I'd just seen come aboard with you, but I didn't think anybody who hadn't seen 'em both would believe there could be two so much alike."

"I should have believed you, Billy, if you had only plucked up courage to come and tell me," said Marion significantly.

"Then you've seen 'em both—both together," exclaimed the boy, smartly catching her point.

"Yes, I have seen them both, though not together," Marion admitted. "And, oh, I'll forgive you a thousand times, Billy, for that little mistake of yours in not mentioning the man on the quay.

I cannot be cross with you after the relief you have brought me now. Auntie," she went on, turning to the mystified old lady, "I shall make a clean breast of everything to you presently, but what this boy says has lifted such a load of shame and terror. I can see it plainly now—the wonderful thing that has happened. That poor raving creature in the sail-room is not Leslie—my dear husband Leslie—at all."

Aunt Jane's eyes grew rounder and wider. "It amounts to this then," she said after reflection, "that the man who called me an old cat is not the man you married?"

"That is so," Marion replied, kissing her.

"Thank God, for that is all that matters," said Aunt Jane solemnly. "Except that I should like to ask," she added, "which of the two is really Nigel Lukyn. I suspect that I am going to be able to say 'I told you so.'"

Badger's eyes gleamed like those of an inquisitive bird, very clear and bright, as he waited for Marion's answer. And guessing what was in her faithful little friend's mind, she drew herself up proudly as she replied: "My husband's true name is Leslie Armytage, and he is my husband by right and my own choice. The man who insulted you and me, after coming aboard by false pretence, is Nigel Lukyn, who ought to be in the lunatic asylum from which he has evidently escaped."

"It is for me to say 'Thank God,' too, then," cried Badger, brushing his sleeve across his eye. "It gave me a turn last night when I heard him claim *that* name—the name that——"

He checked himself, but Marion guessed what he would have added—the name that had probably been first vaunted in pride and then been thrust away as an unspeakable thing in the boy's humble home after Sister Sue's flash "gentleman friend" had gone from his word. Marion shuddered to think how narrowly that name had missed being her own.

"If you two have cause for thankfulness, surely I have more," she said. "I think that I will run away and be thankful by myself for a little."

She left the saloon, and seeking her own state-room, now happily menaced no longer by an unhinged human derelict in the next cabin, she sat down to try to realise the truth as it had flooded in upon her by the light of Badger's disclosure about the "double" on the quay at Southampton. That her husband was Leslie Armytage instead of the insensate brute imprisoned by her yacht-captain inspired no anger. Recalling the scene on the jetty at Broadstairs, she could understand that Leslie's deception had been unpremeditated. She remembered how she had flung her arms round him and kissed him in sheer delight at finding him so much "nicer" than the Nigel Lukyn she had expected.

Yes, and she had hardly given him time to state his errand, which she now correctly guessed must have been to announce the breakdown of her scheme because of Lukyn's unfitness to be at large. The previous affinity—the subtle attraction that had already subsisted between them—had reasserted itself on both sides, and each had yielded

to its all-conquering influence. It was, she told herself in joyful condonation of Leslie's fault, a case of "six of one and half a dozen of the other."

But if the blame could be apportioned equally, surely Leslie's share was wiped away altogether by the steadfast courage with which he had assumed the perils of the man he had drifted into personating. He had been warned by Quayne at the outset that the delegates of the American secret society meant business, yet he had incurred the risk with a light heart for the sake of her love. For the sake of her love. Yes, that pardoned everything; more than that, it left the balance against her, for what greater devotion could a man offer than to walk daily and hourly hand in hand with death, hugging the dreadful secret to himself, without solace or sympathy?

The thought of Leslie's silently-endured suspense filled her with sudden alarm for his present safety. She had no doubt in her mind now that Nigel Lukyn was the victim desired by the Americans, and she in her innocence had gone to them and assured them that her husband *was* Nigel Lukyn. By some strange mischance he had been left alone in the town that sheltered them and their murderous designs. In spite of their apparent concurrence in her attempt to secure immunity for "Lukyn," as she then believed him, at the expense of "Armytage," she had very little faith in it, and her mistrust had been the cause of her ordering the yacht to sea so quickly. With two such indistinguishable "doubles" in existence the desperadoes might easily make a fatal mistake if they

learned, as they would be sure to do, that Leslie had been left behind at Exmouth. They might even have already wreaked their vengeance on him while she herself was practically a prisoner in their hands.

Besides, what had she been thinking of, selfishly sitting down to enjoy her own relief, when Leslie, dear fellow, if, as she prayed, he was still uninjured, would be wondering, heart-broken, at her so mysteriously sailing away. He would be telling himself that she had discovered just what she had discovered, and would be making himself miserable with the delusion that she was angry. She had forgotten everything in her new-found happiness. She ought to have ordered the *Idalia* back to Exmouth half an hour ago.

At least there should be no further delay. She hastened out on deck, waving a cheery promise of enlightenment to Aunt Jane as she passed through the saloon, and mounted the ladder to the bridge. The captain was stamping up and down in a dual effort to keep his feet warm and to blow off the steam of his recent wrath. The quartermaster at the wheel said afterwards that he had never known "the old man" so cross as in that half hour after he had clapped the owner's husband's double under hatches.

Crawford, with his old-time P. and O. stateliness, advanced to meet Marion as she steadied herself from the shining brass rail of the ladder on to the surer foothold of the bridge. From the sail-room forward came howls like those of a trapped wild beast. The honest sailor could not

understand the radiant vision that faced him, her eyes a-glitter with excitement and her hair all fluttered by the salt breeze. This was not the lady of sorrows whom he had pitied from the depths of his manly heart just now.

"Captain Crawford!" she cried breathless, "I want the yacht to go back to Exmouth at once—at full speed. How soon can we be there?"

He gave an order to the steersman, who sent the wheel spinning round, and then, before replying, he consulted his gold chronometer.

"It is now half-past eleven, and we are off the Lizard," he said. "I can promise, all going well, to put the ship into the Exe at four o'clock. But not a moment earlier," he added, with a conscientious preciseness, as he watched the yacht's bows curving under the orders he had given.

And fixed to the stern-post, close to the mighty rudder that his voice controlled, was a water-proof box containing, among other things, a little tube of acid that would eat its way, as calculated by the science of that very scientific gentleman Mr. Scorrier Voules, exactly at four o'clock into its surroundings.

But of that Captain Crawford knew nothing, nor did anyone else on board.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

JUST IN TIME.

MARION remained on the bridge while the captain superintended the altering of the yacht's course, for she had something to say to him as soon as he should be free to give her his whole attention. It was absolutely necessary that she should make a confidant of him, if the story of her marriage was not to be bandied from end to end of England. For herself she would not mind so much, but for the sake of Leslie's good name the secret must be kept at any price. The muck-rake of scandal must not be allowed free play with the error of him who had erred for love of her.

So, when the *Idalia* was steaming on a straight course again, with the rugged Cornish cliffs on the port instead of on the starboard side, Marion drew the captain out of earshot of the steersman.

"Captain Crawford," she said, "I know that you are my friend, as you were my father's before me. I have just escaped from what looked like a most hopeless calamity. 'but there is another

ahead of me. May I count on you in a very delicate business?"

"You don't want me to steal anything, or kill anyone, for you, Mrs. Armytage, I presume?" said the captain with a grim smile. "I might do either if you made a point of it, though I hope you won't—because of my wife and family. If it's merely telling a lie, now, something might be done."

"It isn't even that," Marion replied earnestly. "It is to keep a secret, and to advise me how to have it kept by all on board. The man who is shouting and singing down there in the sail-room is not my husband, but his 'double.' I have only just discovered it. Mr. Armytage was most unaccountably left behind at Exmouth, and this person took his place."

"Sounds like a first-class fairy tale," said Captain Crawford doubtfully. "It would be good enough news, though, if it were true."

"You will know that it is true when you have heard my confession," Marion replied gravely.

And into the sympathetic ears of the captain she poured the history of the last few months, commencing with her engagement to Nigel Lukyn and her wild scheme to liberate him from the asylum, and ending with the blunder she had made the previous day in denouncing her husband to the American avengers as Nigel Lukyn. The only thing which in her loyalty she kept back was Leslie's deception of herself. She led the captain to believe that she had married her husband in the full knowledge that he was not Lukyn, but

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the man whom she had procured to take his place. She had, in fact, exercised a woman's privilege to change her mind.

Marion watched the weather-beaten face anxiously as she finished her breathless recital, and was relieved to see a paternal smile assert itself.

"A pretty kettle of fish!" was the old sailor's comment. "So that mad demon below is the real Nigel Lukyn. Yes, I can foresee trouble for you if it gets about. But it need not do that, unless that treacherous hussy of yours blabs. My crew don't read the society papers, and I don't suppose one of 'em ever heard of your engagement to Mr. Lukyn."

For Marion had included in her narrative a full account of her proved suspicions of Crispin's truckling with Roumier and Company.

"What do you propose?" she asked.

"Leaving the maid aside," said the captain, "I should tell the men that the chap below is a base counterfeit, who took advantage of a resemblance to Mr. Armytage to come aboard to loot the plate-chest, and succumbed to the drink he procured. That yarn would wash all right with the ship's company. They'll be so pleased to find, begging your pardon, Mrs. Armytage, that you haven't married a lunatic or a blackguard that they'll swallow anything."

"A thousand thanks; that will be the way out of it then," said Marion. "I will try and manage Crispin—bribe her, if necessary—if you will put it to the crew like that."

And she began to descend the bridge ladder

with the intention of coming to a clean settlement with Crispin there and then. But Crawford stayed her, almost roughly laying a hand on her arm for a moment.

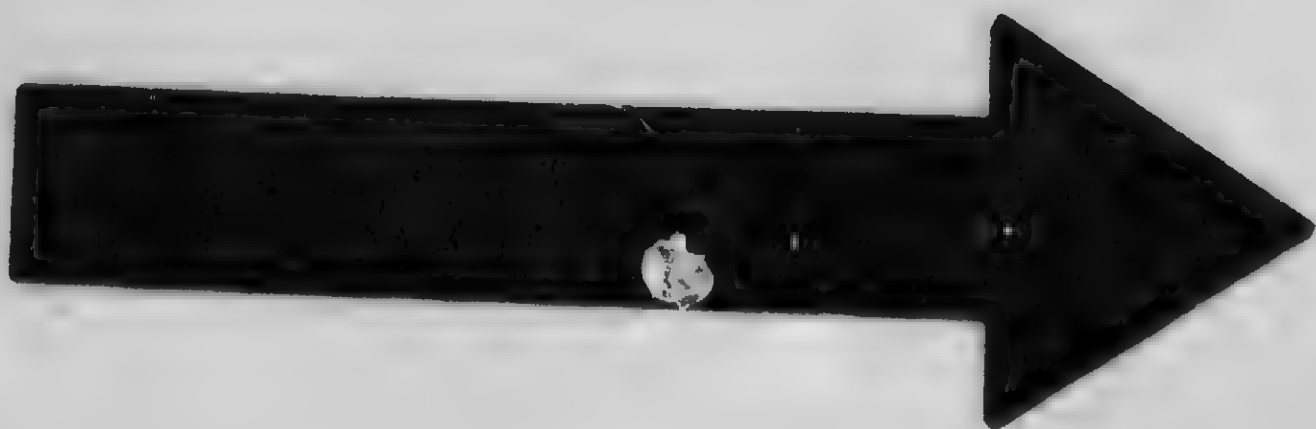
"I am sorry," he said, "to have to make a stipulation. I am acting as your friend, and you have entrusted this affair to me. This woman has been intriguing with very dangerous folk, by your own showing, Mrs. Armytage. I should prefer to see her for myself in the chart-room, but first I should wish to have a word with that smart detective urchin of yours."

There was a note of anxiety, veiled by the unwonted tone of authority in addressing her, that puzzled Marion. "Crispin can be very plausible. Are you sure that you can manage her, Captain Crawford?" she said.

"I am going to try; I have managed a plausible woman for twenty years," came the crisp answer, followed by the enigmatic tag: "I have got the safety of the ship to think of."

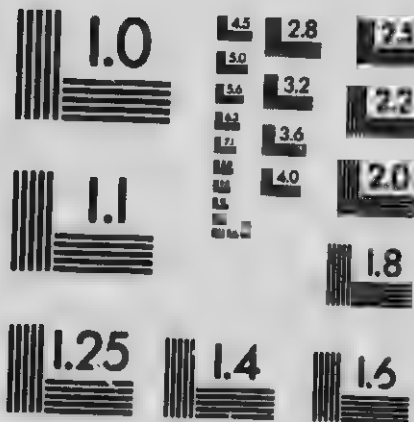
"Very well," said Marion, "I will send Badger to you in the chart-room, and afterwards you can have Crispin in."

When she had flitted down the ladder, Captain Crawford summoned the chief officer to take his place and descended to the chart-room, where the wreck of the Marconi apparatus had been cleared away. Seating himself at the table, he passed the time in thoughtfully paring his nails till Badger appeared, alert and respectful. Marion had told the boy that the captain was acting on her behalf, and that he was to be treated as herself.



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Crawford sized the London youngster up in one approving glance, and began abruptly: "Your instructions from Mr. Quayne were that those Americans were dangerous. Did he warn you to guard against any particular form of danger?"

"No, sir," was the reply. "My duty was to inform Mrs. Armytage if I recognised any of them in or about the ship. Then she was to let him know, and he was to take steps accordingly.

"Quite so; he could hardly have expected a nipper like you to tackle such a bad crowd single-handed. But you are a smart lad, and capable of forming your own conclusions. When the woman came aboard dressed as a nun, for instance, what do you think was her game?"

Too cautious to commit himself at a moment's notice to a theory of which he had no proof, Badger hesitated. "I can't say what her game was, sir," he replied; "but I can tell you what she did. She tried to hide a parcel under the settee in the saloon while she was talking to Miss Middleton, but when she tumbled that I was watching her she stopped, and tucked it away again under her cloak."

Crawford's eyes flashed fire. "By Gad!" he exclaimed, "it must have been an infernal machine."

"Now you mention it, sir, that was what I thought, but it wasn't any use scaring Mrs. Armytage about it, as the thing wasn't left on board," Badger replied.

The captain rose in all the majesty of his brass buttons, and gravely extended his hand to the boy across the table. "I believe you saved my ship and all in her," he said. "I don't like your trade,

but there's a gold watch coming your way as soon as we make harbour. Now cut along, and send Mrs. Armytage's maid to me."

Badger, flushed with pleasure at the praise, opened his mouth to defend his "trade," thought better of it and vanished—to be replaced after a brief interval by Crispin, who entered without any effort to conceal her agitation. Ever since the previous day she had been expecting the blow to fall, but she had thought to have it out with her mistress—not with this stern old sailor, who was glaring at her so fiercely.

"Look here, I'm not one to mince matters," he began roughly, with intention. "Do you know that you have rendered yourself liable to a long term of penal servitude, if not to be hanged, for conspiracy to murder me?"

"To murder you, sir?" she feigned a giggling surprise. "You are joking."

The captain ignored this spurious mood, and went on inexorably: "To murder me and all aboard, and to destroy the ship. There is evidence to prove it. Now, if you are not prosecuted with the actual criminals, we—that is Mrs. Armytage and I—expect something in return for our leniency."

Crispin caught at the chance. There was a bargain to be made, and she had shaped her life on the making of bargains. Her employer and her people wanted something of her, after all. She moistened her thin lips, and demanded with an injured air:—

"There is a law in the land. What do you mean by accusing me of murder? Because I had

some friends, I suppose—respectable Americans—whom my mistress disapproved of. It's too ridiculous."

Captain Crawford disregarded the feminine outburst entirely. "It is proved," he proceeded, "that you have been hand and glove with a woman who boarded this vessel at Southampton, dressed as a nun, with the intention of leaving an explosive machine in the saloon, which would have sent every soul on board to the bottom—*yourself included.*"

The straightforward hitting had struck home at last. The captain, watching the maid with a wary eye, saw her grow ashen grey, while her fingers fumbled at her twitching mouth. He waited for her to speak, moved the sextant on the table to give her time, and then, as she remained silent, took up his parable again.

"What we demand of you," he went on, "is that you should keep silence about what has happened this trip. The man who came aboard with your mistress and misbehaved himself, as you may have been told, is not Mr. Armytage, but an escaped lunatic who closely resembles him—the individual, in fact, against whom the vengeance of your American friends should really be directed. Now, one of your class knows better than I do what would happen if a story like that got abroad. There would be lies—lies and exaggerations and scandals everywhere. You know who he is, eh?"

"I heard him say he was Nigel Lukyn—the name of the gentleman whom the mistress was first engaged to," replied Crispin humbly. All the

starch had gone out of her now—so quickly, indeed, that Crawford was at a loss to account for it.

"Well, what we want of you is to be silent about the man's identity," he proceeded. "We shall get rid of him at the earliest opportunity, but it is necessary that his presence on this ship should never be known—that is, as Nigel Lukyn, you understand. No one who is likely to do us any harm, but yourself, is aware of the fact. Are you willing to subscribe to absolute secrecy—in consideration of being allowed to go scot free?"

"Yes," Crispin murmured faintly.

"Then get out of this," said the captain, rising and shaking himself.

But the woman lingered. The mixture of insolence and cringing servility which had marked her entrance was all gone, having given place to fear—not a vague apprehension of the consequences of her treachery, but the haunting dread of some present personal danger. Her knees were shaking, and she gazed with wild eyes from the door as though she would fain have fled, not only out of the chart-room, but clean out of the ship had that been possible.

"I cannot go yet, sir; I must tell you something," she gasped. "You really think that they would try to—to blow up the yacht?"

"I said so, and I meant it," snapped the captain, his wrathful disgust changed in a moment to alert attention. There was something serious here. This was not a woman to go all to pieces over an averted peril.

"Then they may have succeeded yet, sir; one

of them was round the yacht in Exmouth harbour last night, after dark," Crispin wailed in the abandonment of a terror entirely selfish.

Crawford was very quiet now—almost gentle. "Let me have it, short and clear—exactly what happened," he said.

There was no further need to drag the information from her. With a volubility that refused to be checked, but in which the captain discerned the truth, she described how she had been on deck looking towards the shore for the return of her mistress, when she had observed a small boat, manned by a single rower, approach the yacht. She herself stood in the shadow of the deck-houses, but for the fraction of a second the rower's face was lit up by a gleam from one of the port-holes. It was the face of Fayter Frayne, one of the Americans.

At first she thought he was making for the gangway, to come aboard, but he had changed his course, and, rowing close under the yacht's side, had passed along towards the stern. He remained there over ten minutes before she saw the boat again, and then it was returning towards the landing-stage.

Captain Crawford had heard enough. Cutting short Crispin's protestations that she held no communication with Frayne on this occasion, he pushed her out of the chart-room and ran up on the bridge. A pull at the engine-room bell and a sharp order to the man at the wheel brought the *Idalia* to a stop within six of her own lengths.

But long before the graceful yacht lay stationary, heaving on the choppy waters of the Channel, a boat had been manned and lowered, of which the

captain himself took charge. With him went his two mates and one old quarter-master—all tried servants of their beloved owner, who might be trusted to keep their mouths shut.

With Crawford's knowledge of where to look, the exploration did not take long. Luckily it was conducted under the sweep of the stern, out of sight of the row of faces craning over the sides, and so lent itself to secrecy. For in a quarter of an hour the captain's screw-driver had withdrawn the last of the screws which the patient Frayne had driven home the night before in happy ignorance that his approach had been observed.

Crawford handled his prize very gingerly. "I am going to drop this thing into the sea," he said, and, hardly giving his trusted companions a glimpse of the oil-skin-covered box, he let it fall out of sight into the safety of the deep.

"What we have got to say to any gaping idiot that asks questions when we get aboard is that the propeller had fouled some wreckage," he remarked in a tone that his officers appreciated at its full value.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AT THE HALF-WAY HOUSE.

LESLIE ARMYTAGE, after leaving the hotel at Exmouth, congratulated himself that the field was clear for him to keep faith with Nigel Lukyn's enemies. He was under the impression, as the result of their conversation the previous night, that he had hoodwinked Quayne into leaving him alone; but, with a very keen appreciation of the detective's powers of insight, he preferred not to put them to the test again in the morning.

For at one period of their talk he had not been quite sure that Quayne was accepting him at the valuation he wished to inspire—that of a weak-spirited coward whose sole object in parting company was to flee as far as possible from the Americans. Had he remained to breakfast with Quayne, the latter might have seen cause to revise his original judgment.

So it was that by the time Quayne sent Peckthorne up to his room before starting for Poldhu, Leslie was breaking his fast in an obscure coffee-shop in a side street. The food was greasy and

unpalatable, but he reflected grimly that that mattered little to a man who had but a few hours to live. What *did* matter was that, few as though the hours were, they had to be spent somehow and somewhere, and the spending promised to be tedious work. He had no one to speak to and nowhere to go—till he was due after midnight at the solitude selected for his death.

One thing was certain—he could not remain in the dingy eating-house all day, had he been inclined to do so, without exciting remark. Nor could he tramp the streets of Exmouth from morning to evening without attaining the same result. It was the dead season of the year, and he would be noticed on the deserted pavements by someone or other who would recognise him—after what was left of him had been found out yonder.

He had made his bargain—he had bought Marion's life with his own—and he was desirous of fulfilling it with absolute fidelity. It would be distinctly unfair to leave behind avoidable traces which might bring disaster on the other parties to the contract, however richly they might deserve it.

A happy thought occurred to him. The smell of stale bacon and coffee grounds inspired it, with a longing for fresh air. He would walk out into the country and make himself familiar with the place where he was to surrender that night, and then he would find some local hostelry where he could obtain food and shelter till it was time to meet Nigel Lukyn's foes.

He had mastered the general location of the *rendezvous* from the map shown him by Berthe

Roumier, but it would be well to obtain clearer directions. Rapping on the table with his knife, he brought to his side the solitary waitress, who had been inspecting him during the meal with the attention due to a customer who was not only well dressed, but the only one. He paid his score, and said :—

“I am doing a little sight-seeing. Can you put me in the way for a walk to the West Down Beacon ? It is near the village of Littleham, is it not ? ”

The girl gave him full directions. He was to walk out some two miles on the Salterton road, and then, after passing an inn called “The Halfway House,” strike into a series of lanes which would bring him to the Beacon. He could not go wrong, as there was a flag-staff on the top, visible for miles.

Leslie thanked his informant, and was soon out of the town, striding along the high road in the direction given him. It was a fine winter morning, the cold of the day before having been dispelled by a soft westerly breeze blowing in from the sea, and unconsciously his spirits rose as he left the straggling suburbs of the growing resort behind him. With an effort of sheer will he drove the event of the coming night into the background of his thoughts and set himself to enjoy the lovely air and the curving beauty of the Devon coast.

Long before he came to the inn he saw the flag-staff on the crest of the West Down, and thence onward he had no difficulty in reaching his goal. After passing the Halfway House, he left the main road and followed a lane which presently dwindled

into a moorland footpath and so brought him to the gorse-clad summit of the headland.

It was as Berthe Roumier had said. Just before reaching the highest point, which, from the shoulder of the landward side, looked as if it immediately overhung the sea, he found that it did not, but that a sheep-track diverged from the path into a wild and rugged tract of landslide that sloped by ever varying gradients down to the pebble beach three hundred feet below.

Still forcing himself to regard everything pertaining to his midnight appointment from a detached point of view, Leslie turned downwards into this scarped and bramble-covered wilderness. In places the descent became a scramble, and at others he had to quickly jump aside to avoid the numerous quagmires of rain-soaked loam. At first the beach was so far away that the sound of the waves plashing on the pebbles came up as the merest tinkle, but as he made his way lower and lower, the growl of the tide grew and grew in rhythmical diapason.

His rough-and-tumble struggle with the bushes and swamps of the ancient landslip left him no time for thought till he came to the length of his tether—a nasty drop of a dozen feet down a dry but perpendicular water-course, which, if he had wanted to get there, would have landed him on the beach. The smugglers of old days might have come up from the sea that way, but no one but an active and adventurous schoolboy would want to use it now.

“My assailants will not come round from Ex-

mouth by water," he told himself as he turned back to climb by the way he had come to the higher ground. The thought compelled him to face for a moment in imagination the prospect of the near future. Should he have to wander in these solitudes for long, waiting for his executioners to come, or would they be there before him and strike mercifully, swift and sure, before he was aware of their presence?

He resolutely curbed this temporary lapse into speculative nervousness, and mounted to the brow of the cliff, where the wind hummed in the wire stay of the coastguard signal-mast. The coastguard station was two miles away, the mast on this lonely pinnacle being only for emergencies. Leslie let his gaze range seawards in a vain hope that he might descry the *Idalia* returning to the Exe, not because he would have communicated with the yacht, but because it would have shown that Marion had discovered Lukyn's identity and was putting him ashore. But from Berry Head westward to the dim outline of Portland in the east the sea carried no craft larger than a Brixham trawler.

The most harrowing part of the task he had set himself was to leave the world in ignorance of what tragedy had befallen on, or to, the dainty pleasure ship on which he had spent four days that now seemed like a distant dream. But that, the chief item in his atoning sacrifice, had to be borne, and he mastered the passing weakness.

"They give a condemned prisoner a square feed before they lead him out to the gallows, and I

may as well eat and drink," he reflected, as he started to walk inland again. On his way to the Beacon he had marked the Halfway House as likely to be a convenient headquarters to lay up in during the ensuing hours, and thither he bent his steps. On entering the old-fashioned bar parlour, he found the accommodation homely but comfortable, and he decided to remain at the inn during the afternoon and evening—or at any rate till "closing time" compelled him to take to the open and wander about till the appointed hour.

His mood was such that he took a strange enjoyment in the physical discomforts which were the side-issues of his sacrifice. It would have been so much easier to have gone back to Exmouth and spent the interval in the luxurious hotel where he had slept, but there was the chance that Quayne might return there and render the keeping of his word difficult, if not impossible. "Alone and unarmed," he had promised to meet the Knights of Industry, and he would observe the compact in the spirit and the letter.

Having partaken of such refreshment as the house could afford, he lit a pipe and sat by the cosy fire, smoking and brooding till it occurred to him that he owed it to Marion to make his confession before he died. Heaven only knew what complications might have arisen from Lukyn's intrusion onto the yacht, though he was confident that Marion would quickly have discovered that the intruder was not her husband. But he must make it perfectly clear that he, Leslie Armytage—the man who had been left behind and had disappeared

--was the man who had married her under a false pretence, but not under a false name.

Having procured a sheet of note-paper and an envelope from the landlord, he wrote a manly and straightforward explanation of his conduct, taking all the blame on himself, and not even distantly alluding to the irresistible temptation he had been subjected to in that spontaneous embrace on the jetty at Broadstairs. That was all. He made no reference to the American vendetta, gave no hint as to his future intentions, and put no heading to show where the letter was written.

He left Marion free to assume that he intended to rejoin her on the return of the yacht. She might suspect that he had fallen a victim to Nigel Lukyn's pursuers, but he himself would furnish no clue to help her in hunting them down. In return for the thrice-blessed privilege of saving her and the other lives on the yacht, he had sworn to let them have immunity so far as he was concerned, and they should have it, both before and after the event.

He addressed the letter to Marion's flat in London, and having ascertained that it would bear the Exmouth post-mark if he walked a mile or so to a certain wall box, he went out and posted it. If he had used the Littleham post-office nearer at hand, the mark might have furnished a clue. The short winter's day was drawing to a close by the time he returned to the Halfway House, and lights were already glinting from parlour and tap-room.

"This will be the place where the coroner will sit on me," he muttered grimly. "That is, if I

am ever found," he added, with a recollection of those convenient quagmires in the landslip, which he had noticed in the morning.

Dodging between some country carts drawn up at the door, he crossed the threshold of the inn and passed into the parlour. He had had the room to himself earlier in the day, and an unjustifiable resentment seized him on finding that privacy was to be his no longer. Two gentlemen were occupying the room, seated one on either side of the fireplace, and they looked up on his entrance.

One was Scorrier Voules, the other Fayter Frayne.

The situation was one which, in its climax of the unexpected, came to Leslie as a bracing nerve- tonic. The two men who had chanced to seek the same shelter while waiting to kill him were so obviously disconcerted by his appearance that it gave him a sense of superiority which he could not resist emphasising in words.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "No, I assure you that there is no occasion for alarm. There is no one behind me. In fact, I have been occupying this room all the afternoon—till I went out for a short walk just now. There is nothing that I know of to prevent your rigidly adhering to your programme with a full sense of security."

He closed the door and advanced towards the fire, drawing forward a chair and seating himself between the two, with his feet on the fender. Frayne emitted a growl that might have meant relief or anything, but Voules, whose methods were none the less deadly because they savoured

of the velvet glove, stood up and pointed to the chair—an easy one—which he had vacated.

"Pray sit here, sir," he said. "I fear that I must unintentionally have dispossessed you of your seat."

"Not a bit of it," Leslie replied with a laugh. "I am very comfortable where I am. Besides, this is a public room, and no one has any private rights in it. So, my friend, you did not credit me with common honesty," he added, turning affably to Frayne, who had not ceased to glare at him.

"You're talking through your hat," snarled the fierce little man.

"Then let me make myself clear," Leslie proceeded in the same tone of good-humoured banter. "From the way you glanced over my shoulder when I came in I imagined that you thought I was the precursor of a posse of policemen. That was very rude of you."

Voules, who had resumed his seat, made a sign to his companion and, stretching out his thin fingers, tapped Leslie on the knee. "I, at any rate, am convinced of your *bonâ fides*, sir," he said. "So convinced am I that I will make an appeal to you. My colleague is rather short-tempered. To provoke him might be to bring about a premature crisis, which would put us to the disadvantage designed to be prevented by our bargain with you."

"I am sure I apologise very humbly," said Leslie with genuine regret. "Nothing was further from my thoughts than to be offensive or to invite a quarrel. It may interest both of you to know that I came out here this morning with no more

sinister motive than to shake off the detective and, incidentally, to reconnoitre the scene of our rendezvous so as to give you the least possible trouble."

"By George, sir, but you have got grit," Voules exclaimed. And, inspired by the irrepressible curiosity of the average American, to get at the back of motives, he asked: "It is for the wife that you are going through the mill so straight?"

Leslie merely nodded, for he did not care to drag Marion's name into a discussion with his murderers.

But the silent gesture convinced Frayne, who had never ceased to watch him, more than words could have done. The hand that had been thrust quite openly into his hip-pocket came out again and went straight to the bell.

"It kind of makes one sorry," he mused aloud, lapsing into his vernacular in his unwonted emotion. And then, as he jerked the old-fashioned tasselled cord, he said: "I guess there's no call for us to be so fluffy. We're all *men*, anyhow. You'll drink with me, stranger?"

"With pleasure—provided you don't overdo it," Leslie replied with a significant smile at the glass which Frayne had already emptied. "I have a right, I think, to expect the favour of a steady hand and no bungling."

The landlord came in for the orders, and presently there was to be seen in the homely parlour of this wayside inn the curious spectacle of three men hob-nobbing together, two of whom were pledged, with his own consent, to do the third to death in the coming night.

Voules, with a tact to which Leslie played up

loyally, steered the talk to general topics of mutual interest. Both had played golf at Newport, and Leslie had once gone on a shooting trip in Kansas, which, it seemed, was Voules' native state. Nor was Frayne left out in the cold, for he unexpectedly developed a knowledge of music, which had been one of Leslie's diversions in the old days of his prosperity.

Suddenly, in the midst of an argument between Frayne and Leslie on the merits of Tschaikowski as an exponent of weird themes, the door of the parlour slid open so quietly that it would have escaped observation but for the flicker of the draught-fluttered oil lamp. As it was, the men looked round.

There stood Berthe Roumier in the doorway, like a brilliant picture in a dingy frame, regarding the symposium with questioning eyes.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

THE FIGURE BY THE BUSH.

BERTHE closed the door and came slowly forward, divesting herself of her heavy sable stole. Scorrier Voules anticipated Frayne in rising and relieving her of the fur, and set a chair for her, which for the moment she ignored.

Leslie also had risen and stood facing her, wondering not a little at the power she wielded over the two men—so spritely and girlish did she look. But in the dark eyes, now beginning to twinkle, he read the secret of their influence. There was no sweetness in the frosty glitter of her smile—only certain subtle fascination, without a hint of tenderness or mercy. Yet, for all her cruel errand, Leslie thought that he discerned a stern honesty of purpose in the face, which could be moved by a sense of justice, if it were appealed to and convinced. Which was just what he had no intention of doing.

"Quite a snug party," she exclaimed, glancing at the tumblers and sniffing at the tobacco smoke. "A chance meeting, I presume, and three sensible men decided to make the best of it, eh?"

"That is so," Voules replied. "This gentleman sought the obscurity of the inn in a praiseworthy effort to throw Quayne and his assistant off his track. Frayne and I are here in obedience to your orders, not having been followed by the antique shadow. So we all concluded to bury the hatchet for an hour or two."

"The best thing you could have done," said Berthe, and sinking into the chair she laughed merrily. "I was thinking of how neatly I gave that old watch-dog the slip," she explained—"also of how funny it is that you, Mr. Lukyn, should have been dodging the same crowd as ourselves. Considering our—well, divergent interests, it has the elements of a dramatic situation."

"It bade fair to be embarrassing at first," Leslie replied, falling in with her mood. He had voluntarily yielded himself to these people, and he saw no reason for being "nasty" with them now. It was grimly amusing, as to soldiers of opposing armies who meet in the lull of battle at some intervening stream, to exchange courtesies with those who mean to kill you a little later. In fact, his sense of humour came to his aid.

"If it was embarrassing, I will wager that it was Mr. Frayne who tossed the apple of discord," said Berthe, glancing none too kindly at her fiery ally.

"Fayter made amends," put in Voules hastily, and it accentuated the weird harmony that prevailed that Voules should come to the rescue of the other. Latterly the friction between the two had grown more intense, and it was an open secret that their fair directress was, as she termed it,

the "bone of contention." But there was never any divergence of interests in their main object. In that they were united in the common yoke of fanaticism.

"Yes, I guess I made it all right," said Frayne, and then, with a latent generosity that his compatriots had never suspected, he added: "I couldn't help it. I am going to do what I crossed the sea to do, but—Lukyn is a real *man*."

Berthe Roumier gazed thoughtfully into the fire without replying. From where he sat, for he had backed his chair to make room for her, Leslie had a view of the mobile, vivacious face in which the lips were sometimes youthfully ripe and full, and anon but a thin red curve. Just now they were tight drawn back to the teeth, firmly set, and the girl's brows were puckered in a puzzled frown.

Suddenly she turned to Leslie. Her movements were always impulsive.

"You have made our task very hard for us, Mr. Lukyn," she said. "As my friend Mr. Frayne has told you, we are not soft-hearted where what we conceive to be our duty is at stake. We shall do what we came to do. But we expected to have to wipe out the biggest scoundrel on earth, and somehow you don't live up to your reputation. I have no power to spare you. I cannot refer the matter back to my principals. I am pledged to strike you down; but, whatever you have been in America, you have acted as a gentleman now. Cannot you make it easier for us?"

"I really don't take your meaning," Leslie replied.

Berthe moved slightly, so as to look him through and through as she made her demand. "You have been in a lunatic asylum," she said. "There is no trace of insanity about you now, but you may have been insane when you did those things in Chicago. Cannot you give me an assurance to that effect?"

"I am afraid I cannot; I have never admitted insanity," was the answer.

"You remember your affiliation to the Knights of Industry and your conduct afterwards? How came you, a man of fine instincts and natural honour, to act as you did towards Matt Dempsey and others, making hungry wives and fatherless children in our capitalist-ridden land?"

Leslie could only shake his head, genuinely bewildered. He had no knowledge of the causes which had set the vendetta going against Nigel Lukyn. Berthe had poured it all out to Marion, but he had not seen his wife since.

Berthe seized on the blankness in his face as her justification. "I see how it is—you were insane when you were guilty of such baseness," she exclaimed in a tone of relief. "That salves our consciences, for we are punishing you for what you were then—a savage, cunning brute—not for what you are now."

It was a curious argument, of which Leslie hardly saw the full force. But he had no objection to having the good opinion of his slayers, and of being on good terms with them to the end, if they so wished it. For a moment it occurred to him to take advantage of their humour and tell them

boldly that he was not the man they wanted. But swift on the heels of that idea came the reflection that to adopt it would be to inspire in them at once the element of personal enmity which they now lacked.

He would have to explain that Lukyn, the man whom they were commissioned to destroy, was on the *Idalia* all the time, and that he, Leslie Armytage, had snatched their prey from their very jaws by assuming his identity in order to mislead them. They would be goaded to fury, and would wreak their vengeance on him by putting less of mercy into their merciless task; for the revelation that he was the "wrong man" would not absolve him from his promise to meet them under the Beacon.

And the latent cruelty in Berthe Roumier's eye told him that she would the more rigidly hold him to it after being so deceived.

"We had better leave it at that," he said with a shrug. "You cannot expect me to go into the physiological reasons which led me to incur the displeasure of your society. I have, however, a favour to ask, which may make your operations easier and safer, and lighten my suspense."

"I can guess your meaning," said Berthe. "You want to put the clock forward a bit—to hasten the affair?"

"Exactly," Leslie replied. "As circumstances have brought us together here, why not settle it at once? It is as dark now as it will be in the middle of the night. There will be no one near that desolate cliff on a cold winter's evening. You would be able to leave the neighbourhood once for

all by one of the late trains, whereas if you wait till the small hours you will be tied to Exmouth till to-morrow, with the risk of having Quayne to reckon with. Also, this inn will close at ten o'clock, and both parties to the contract would have to wander about in the open—a cheerless and ridiculous proceeding."

"What do you say, boys?" Berthe inquired of Voules and Frayne.

"A genuine good scheme," was Voules' comment.

"I repeat that we are dealing with a *man*," said Frayne. "Most creatures calling themselves such would be grasping at every minute. He has a right to have his request granted."

"That is my view, leaving selfish considerations aside," said Berthe gently, and her piquante face wore a look of real sorrow.

So it was arranged that the Americans should leave the inn first in a body, and make their way to the cliffs, and that Leslie should follow them a quarter of an hour later. He asked why they should not all go together—he was a competent guide, having been over the ground in the morning. But to this proposal Berthe would not listen for a moment, and she was strongly backed by the two men.

"It would seem like simple butchery," she said, shuddering, "to walk out there, hand in hand as it were, and then——. No, we will say good-bye as friends here, Mr. Lukyn, with what mutual respect we can feel for one another, and when we meet again out yonder it will be as strangers."

She rose from her chair, and Leslie also got up, and, being a little quicker than the other two men,

handed her the sable stole which Voules had placed on a side table. The trifling courtesy, which was only an act of simple volition, natural from any gentleman towards a lady leaving a room, changed the whole programme.

"I cannot stand it!" cried Berthe, tossing the handsome fur aside and sitting down again. "There is no need for me to go. It is not woman's work, God knows, though you boys will bear me witness that I have not shirked anything really required of me. I shall stay here—till you two come back."

Voules and Frayne were on their feet by this time, buttoning up their overcoats, and they received their chief's decision with evident relief. Their widely differing types of countenance showed how they had dreaded the ordeal of doing a deed of blood in the presence of a woman. Leslie noticed the lightening of their load, and, as they moved towards the door, he intuitively held out his hand.

"Shake!" he said. "I am nearly as sorry for you as I am for myself."

Voules gave the ex-cavalry officer a limp, clammy fist, and Frayne wrung the proffered hand warmly.

"You shall know nothing—feel nothing," he said. "It will be quite easy. I will see to that. By God, you *are* a man."

They filed out, and Leslie went and leaned against the mantel-piece, looking down at Berthe, who had covered her face with her hand. An ancient grandfather clock ticked out the fleeting seconds with a horrid insistence that by some queer paradox of nature affected the woman who had played so strenuously for a man's life and, as she thought,

had won, more than the man himself. She looked up at the clock—fiercely, as though she would have loved to smash it to atoms.

"It is terrible," she muttered. "That clock makes it a thousand times worse."

Leslie laughed a little bitterly. "Do you know," he said, "that if I had a week to live instead of about half an hour, I should take a scientific pleasure in studying you and your friends. You calmly plot to send a whole ship-load of people into eternity, and yet you are all three smitten with a sort of cheap sentiment when you are enabled to attain your object by killing only one individual."

"But when one has spoken to that person, and—and he has treated one as chivalrously as you have treated us, it makes all the difference," Berthe replied.

"I can't see it," Leslie persisted stoutly. "And pray, Mademoiselle Roumier, do not run away with the notion that I have treated either you or your friends well or ill. You have scarcely entered into my calculations. My conduct since yesterday evening has been entirely governed by consideration for my wife and my own honour. But really," he added rather wearily, "it is too late for a fruitless discussion."

And, minute by minute, it was becoming later still. The inexorable clock ticked on, and Berthe, acquiescing in his desire for silence, made no further attempt to converse with him whose sands were so quickly running out. She sat with her head buried in her hands till Leslie took his hat from the table. Then she rose and faced him.

"Good-bye, Mr. Lukyn," she said. "I pray to God that it may never again be my lot to serve those with whom I am associated by taking human life."

"I can echo that prayer—for the sake of those against whom you might be employed," Leslie replied with grave politeness. And as he bowed himself out of the inn parlour, as though terminating a duty call, his last vision was of a woman breaking into a torrent of tears.

When he had stepped out into the night and struck into the lane leading to the cliffs, it distracted his thoughts to wonder and puzzle over the complex characters of his vicarious enemies. And he came to the conclusion that character had nothing to do with it, except so far as cunning and technical skill had justified their selection. It was the power behind them that was the motive force—the mighty power of organised human hate. Else, surely, a woman smitten with remorse even to weeping, would have relented and held her hand from the fell task she had undertaken.

And that she meant that task to be performed her tears were the best evidence. Indeed, if she wished to, Berthe Roumier could not spare his life now, for the executioners were ahead of him, beyond recall, waiting in the rugged wilderness which he was fast approaching.

The night, aided by the glitter of stars in a clear sky, was not so dark that on nearing the Beacon he could not see the spectral shape of the flagstaff rising from the summit. And the wind, which had freshened since morning, was making weird

music in the iron stays, helping to guide him to his goal. Having found the way, it could hardly be called a path, leading down from the brink of the cliff into the rugged tumble of the landslip, he paused for a minute on the verge. All the sloping ground immediately below him was black with the shadows of the undergrowth trending downwards to the beach; but, beyond, the sea shimmered faintly in the starlight and sent up a booming sound—like a death-knell.

"No sentiment!" he muttered, putting the gruesome imagery away from him. "And I hope that those two fellows, lurking down there in the brushwood, have done with it too. I don't want to be mangled."

He had resolutely refused to think of Marion since he had posted the letter to her, but now a wave of recollection, tempting him to linger, swept over him. This, too, he stemmed with an effort, and plunged downwards into the "Floors." The descent at first was so steep that in the darkness it was a stumbling scramble; but thirty feet lower down he got into gentler ground, and began picking his way among the sloe bushes and quagmires, wondering when the blow would fall—hoping that it would fall soon.

"Ah, now it comes!" he thought, drawing a long breath.

For a little ahead of him a tall figure was standing, scarcely visible in the still darker shadow of a wild shrub that lifted its leafless arms to the sky.

And he went onwards and downwards to meet his fate.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MOTOR-LAUNCH.

CAPTAIN CRAWFORD, on reaching the deck of the *Idalia* after detaching and sinking the infernal machine, gave orders for "full speed ahead" on the course for Exmouth, and then presented himself in the saloon. Marion and Aunt Jane at once questioned him as to the stoppage of the yacht.

"We ought to pipe all hands to prayers and give thanks to Almighty God," said the captain reverently. "We have been very near to death—all of us."

And he told of the discovery consequent on Crispin's revelation, and of his destruction of the deadly contrivance. Aunt Jane clasped her plump hands, after the manner of her kind, in an agony of terror for a bygone danger, but Marion was agitated for a more potent reason.

"The wretches!" she cried. "But do you not see what this means, Captain Crawford? When they let me go yesterday it was because they believed that they had been successful in destroying

my husband and all on board. They can know nothing of Nigel Lukyn's escape from the asylum, and I, in good faith, told them that my husband was Mr. Lukyn. If they come across my poor Leslie they will certainly murder him. This diabolical attempt shows that their reassurance of me was all a pretence, and that they are as cunning as they are pitiless!"

The captain could not deny the force of her words, but he did his best in his kindly fashion to comfort her.

"Mr. Armytage may have the opportunity of enlightening them that he is the wrong man," he said. "If he discloses the circumstances of his marriage and informs them that Lukyn, as he will believe, is still at the asylum, he will get through all right."

The captain was a poor actor, and spoke with very little conviction, knowing full well that people who would endeavour to blow up a ship to get at one man would not be likely to give him a chance to explain matters before they struck. And Marion saw the forlornness of the hope all too surely.

"No," she said; "my sheet anchor is Quayne, the detective. If he has arrived at Exmouth as a result of my telegram he will protect Leslie."

But, as we know, Quayne had gone to Cornwall on business which Lukyn's destruction of the wireless apparatus had rendered a fool's errand.

"Well," said Crawford, as he left the saloon, "the sooner we are back there the better. I'll drive the boat along as quick as triple expansion

engines can move her, and we've got wind and tide with us."

But for all her speediness the *Idalia* made but poor headway compared with what was demanded of her by the anxious heart of her owner. There were many miles to be traversed between the spot off the Cornish coast where the yacht was stopped and the mouth of the Exe, and every one of those miles seemed like a hundred to Marion as she sat in the saloon and sought distraction by giving Aunt Jane a full account of her madcap scheme to obtain Lukyn's release. Here, too, as in the case of Crawford, she kept back only the fact that she had married Leslie in the belief that he was Nigel.

Being able to make frequent use of the expression, "I told you so," the old lady was in a mood to condone anything, and glossed over the wild project of procuring a "double" in her delight that the "double" had been finally preferred.

"I knew, the moment I set eyes on him, that Nigel Lukyn was a brute, if not a madman, my dear," she exclaimed a dozen times. "Didn't I say so when you brought him to the flat—or words to that effect? It was the wonderful difference in your Leslie when you brought *him* that reconciled me to the match—against my previous judgment, which was the better one, although it was wrong. You know what I mean."

"I was so afraid that you would be prejudiced against Leslie because—well, because when I enlisted his help first it was for money, and he was so very, very poor," Marion faltered.

"Then I'll tell you a secret," Aunt Jane retorted, straightening herself on the couch and looking quite young under the influence of memory. "I am not likely to be prejudiced against your husband if, as you say, he is the son of General Armytage, of Cloudesly Court, Oxfordshire. It is funny to think of me dancing, dear, but I danced with another Leslie Armytage, then of the 23rd Lancers, forty years ago, and—well, there was a little something between us which became nothing. Quite a common story, Marion, but one that doesn't allow of prejudice against that other Leslie's son."

After that the two women could only sit hand in hand and wish that the yacht would move faster, though the vibration of her fabric and the rushing pulse of her straining engines told them that Crawford was doing all he knew. And up on the bridge the captain was watching headland after headland as the graceful vessel slipped past, for that ugly canister which he had picked off the stern-post had inspired him with a shrewd appreciation of Leslie Armytage's danger. He had liked the unassertive, pleasant-voiced young man who had spent four days on the ship without trying to command it or give himself airs, and he would be more than sorry if he suffered in place of the howling madman below.

For Nigel Lukyn had never ceased to howl since he had been thrust into the sail-room, and the captain had paid him frequent visits to see that he was not venting any disclosures that would compromise Marion. But nothing of the sort had occurred. The maniac had lapsed into a

series of incoherent screeches, of which the two able-bodied sentries at the door of the sail-room could make nothing except that he was sorely in need of strong drink. That, of course, was denied to him, and he raved the more.

The short day "was waning when the yacht rounded Berry Head, and, skirting the grand sweep of Torbay, made for the gap in the South Devon coast, through which the Exe wanders to the sea. Long before the *Idalia* crept across the bar into the mouth of the river darkness had fallen, making extreme caution necessary to avoid the sandbanks. In her impatience to land as soon as it was possible, Marion had dressed and had joined the captain on the bridge.

"I want the motor-launch dropped into the water the instant we stop," she said. "I must go ashore and look for Leslie. Just as he went to look for me yesterday," she added, with a nervous laugh.

Captain Crawford passed on the order and turned to Marion, whose face as seen by the light of the binnacle lamp was a picture of fear battling with hope. "Have you any definite plan—where to look?" he asked.

"The house in Holroyd Street, of course," was the answer. "If he is not there and the Americans are gone I shall go to the police and make a clean breast of everything—in the hope that they will find traces."

"You have counted the cost—the publicity?"

"What matters that when my husband's life is at stake, or, if he is dead, his avengement is

to be procured," said Marion hotly. "If they have killed him his murderers shall suffer, if I have to spend all my fortune in hunting them down. And in my grief I shall not be thinking much of the gossip-mongers, Captain Crawford."

The captain sighed, for in spite of the implied reproof he would have given all he possessed to shield his young employer from the hurricane of scandal that he foresaw if it once became a police case. By all means let the police take the business up and run the Americans down if their attentions could be diverted to their real objective, Nigel Lukyn. But Crawford wanted to hush up the *Idalia* part of the story, difficult as it might be — nay, impossible, if anything had happened to Leslie.

"And what are your wishes about that maniac below?" he asked, desirous of changing the subject.

Marion considered for a minute. "The best thing to do will be to keep him on board and wire to Doctor Beaman to send for him," she said at last. "It may entail explanations, but the time has gone by for minding that."

The captain groaned in spirit. "Publicity again," he muttered. "Whichever way we turn the fat has to go into the fire, it seems."

So they slid past the lighted windows on the sea front and groped their way to their former anchorage, the faithful Saunders standing by the davits to superintend the lowering of the launch, Marion left the bridge, in order to lose not a moment, and went to the head of the accommodation

ladder. It had already been dropped into position.

The rattle of the cable told her that the anchor had found its home in the river-bed at last, and immediately afterwards the creaking of the blocks and a faint thud announced that the launch was in the water. Saunders edged the tiny craft to the foot of the ladder, and Marion was on the point of descending when a wild commotion on the deck of the yacht gave her pause. Turning quickly, she saw what had happened. Nigel Lukyn had broken loose from custody, and, pursued by the two sailors he had outwitted, was rushing madly towards her. Thinking that she herself was the object of the frantic charge, she shrank back from the head of the ladder. But, no, he did not seem so see her, or, if so, to care. Tearing by in the frenzy of his madness, he halted suddenly at sight of the quarter-master guarding the ladder, felled him with a well-directed blow, and scampered like a monkey down into the motor-launch.

There floated up a cry of consternation, a shriek of maniac laughter, and, in quick succession, a splash in the water; and an instant later the "tick-tack" of the motor told that the launch was starting.

The quarter-master, who had regained his feet, looked over the yacht's side, and raised the cry of "Man overboard."

But the man, who was Saunders, the second officer, had already gained the foot of the ladder and was mounting fast.

"My God!" he exclaimed as he reached the

deck, spluttering and shaking water from him like a dog. "It's the loony. He picked me up like a feather and chucked me into the river. And he's stolen the launch."

And Captain Crawford, who had seized his night-glasses, was able to confirm the statement from the bridge. The clatter of the motor was scarcely audible now, but the little vessel was visible through the captain's powerful lenses, heading out of the harbour for the open sea.

"Never mind *him*," said Marion, collecting her wits. "Let a boat be manned. I must go ashore at once."

And they flew to do her bidding.

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CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAST CHANCE.

JOHN QUAYNE'S career as a detective had been a justly prosperous one, but after his failure to get into wireless communication with the *Idalia*, he felt that it dragged the balance down against all previous successes. He would gladly have wiped the slate clean of the latter if he could only win now. Yet it seemed hopeless. The yacht was somewhere on the sea with a devilish device on board which was timed to destroy her at four o'clock that afternoon, while Leslie Armytage, his client's husband, was in hourly peril from vengeful enemies.

And he, John Quayne, was out of touch with both. He could neither warn the yacht or protect the man who, for reasons which his shrewd brain was beginning to piece together, had given him the slip.

He paced the platform of the little Cornish station in impatience for the train to come in, yet in doubt as to where to look for. At last, however, just as the whistle of the engine urged

prompt decision, he went into the office and took a ticket back to Exmouth. The latest telegram from his assistant, Peckthorne, dispatched at noon, informed him that the Americans were still there, and that was the place for him.

If the *Idalia* was to be saved now it could be by no aid from him, but at least he would stick like a leech to the trail of the desperadoes who had wrought for her destruction, and he would see to it that they paid the full penalty. His client's terrible end, with her sole surviving blood-relation and all her crew, would remove the seal of professional secrecy, and he would not rest till Berthe Roumier and her confederates had been hanged.

The presence of the mad Nigel Lukyn on board the yacht forbade him to give up all hope. From what he had heard at the asylum, and from what Leslie Armytage had told him, he had no doubt that Lukyn was a dangerous homicidal maniac, whose fits of frenzy were alternated by periods of brooding cunning, and it was probable that on escaping from the asylum he had gone to Marion's flat and tracked her thence to the yacht with the intention of doing her bodily harm. The cunning silence in which the idea had been conceived might by this time have given place to one of his violent outbursts.

Quayne prayed that it might be so, and that in consequence the yacht would be brought to harbour in time to receive one of the warnings which were waiting for her at every port along the coast. But it was as one prepared for the worst that he flung

himself into the corner of the railway carriage, and when at last, wearied and dispirited, he descended at Exmouth Station another blow was in store for him.

The first person he encountered on the platform was his trusty assistant, Peckthorne, looking even more dejected than he himself felt.

"What's wrong, Peck?" he asked shortly, leading the old man aside.

"They've slipped me, sir—the lot of 'em," was the answer. "They left the house separately, the two men first, and the woman last. Acting on your instructions, I let the men run loose and stuck to the woman. What does she do but march straight off to the police-station and stay inside a good ten minutes. When she came out I was ready to go on again, but she played a bluff that fairly choked me off."

"What did she do?" asked Quayne hoarsely.

"Came up to me as bold as brass and said that she had been to complain to the sergeant that I'd been annoying her by following her about," the aggrieved Peckthorne replied. "There was nothing for it but to leave off and wait for you. You have always ordered me not to come into collision with the regular force, sir."

Quayne had very grave doubts, which, as we know, were well-founded, as to what Berthe Roumier had really said inside the police-station. With the serious crime already attempted against the *Idalia*, and the equally serious one in contemplation against Leslie Armytage, it was extremely unlikely that she would attract official

attention to herself by admitting that she was being shadowed by a private agency. She would know that the police are sharp enough to regard persons under such espionage as not wholly immaculate. It would put a clue into their hands which in certain eventualities might be awkward afterwards.

Yet his instructions to his subordinate had been precise on the point, and he made the old man happy by acquitting him of blame. The stars in their courses seemed to be fighting against them both that day.

Peckthorne trotted by his chief's side as they made their way out of the squalidest railway terminus in England, and then, while they stood for a moment aimlessly on the pavement outside, he made unconscious amends for his failure.

"Perhaps it isn't of any consequence, sir," he quavered, "but I think I could put you on to the young gentleman who left the hotel while you were at breakfast this morning. You seemed put out at missing him."

"Go on, man; go on," exclaimed Quayne. "It is of the utmost importance." For his quick mind jumped to the truth that "where the carcass is there shall the eagles be gathered together," and he was not at all sure that there had not been an arrangement to that effect between the carcass and the eagles. If he knew where Leslie Armytage had gone he would have a keen notion where to pick up the lost trail of the Americans.

And Peckthorne proceeded to narrate how, on being compelled to withdraw from shadowing

Berthe Roumier, he had gone to the cheap coffee-house where he had slept the previous night. While he was snatching a much-needed meal the young woman who waited on him had talked to him of a well-dressed gentleman, quite out of the ordinary run of the customers of the place, who had come in early that morning and had breakfast. Her description of his face, figure, and clothes tallied exactly with that of Mr. Armytage as he had been dressed when Peckthorne had seen him with Quayne at the hotel on the previous night.

"Well, where is he?" demanded Quayne, impatiently.

"He asked the way to West Down Beacon, sir, and was particularly interested in hearing that there was an inn near by, known as the 'Half-way House.'"

"Good!" ejaculated the detective. "Your ears have served you better than your eyes to-day. We will drive out there at once. Go and get a fly with a good horse and bring it down to the landing-stage. I must go there first."

For he was still clinging to the hope that the *Idalia* might have put back to Exmouth, or sought some other port under stress of Nigel Lukyn. The long journey from Cornwall, with a tedious wait at Exeter, had absorbed the hours of daylight, and it was dark when he reached the front—so dark that in spite of an expiring glow in the heavens over the Haldon Hills, the electric lights of a steamer passing to her anchorage gleamed and scintillated as from a floating palace.

"The *Idalia* it is!" Quayne exclaimed, recognising the three pole-masts and the twin yellow funnels visible in the ghostly effulgence shed by the yacht herself. He hailed a fisherman who had just landed his catch of herrings, and whose boat was bumping against the quay.

"A sovereign for taking me off to that steamer quick," was his offer. It was long past four o'clock, and the presumption was that the infernal machine had failed to go off or had been discovered; yet he could not rest till he was sure. The man closed with him greedily, and the clumsy boat went lumbering across the choppy waters of the tide-way towards the yacht, which was already swinging to her anchor.

Half way out Quayne suddenly stood up in the stern and peered through the gloom. The sound of distant cries came from the *Idalia*, and he could make out persons running on her deck. Then there was a louder shout than ever, followed by comparative silence.

A few minutes later Quayne's hired boat occupied the same place at the foot of the accommodation ladder whence Nigel Lukyn had just started seaward in the motor-launch. In another moment he was on deck, where Marion was waiting till the boat which she had ordered should be ready.

"The explosive machine—you know of it?" the detective inquired in a hoarse whisper. It was no occasion for ceremonious greeting.

"Safe—forty fathoms under the sea, thanks to a hint from Badger," Marion replied. "But what of my husband? You have seen him—

you have come to tell me of him? Ah, Mr. Quayne, for God's sake, let the news be good."

"I saw him yesterday, but not to-day. Still, no news is good news, or ought to be accounted so," said Quayne evasively.

"You do not know where he is?"

"Not for certain, but I had just obtained information which may lead me to him. I was about to test it, but I had to see that the *Idalia* was safe first. I will start now at once, and give you my report of what has passed afterwards. But what of Lukyn?"

"He is raving mad, and has only now stolen my motor-launch and put out to sea. That, however, of is no consequence. I, too, have many things to explain, and we can make our exchanges as we go to look for Leslie. There, my boat is manned at last."

Quayne hardly knew what to say to this proposal. If the theory that had been growing upon him all day was correct, and Leslie had bought the information about the infernal machine by placing himself, as Nigel Lukyn, at the disposal of the Americans, the clue to his whereabouts furnished by Peckthorne might be the clue to a tragedy accomplished or in progress.

"Take my advice and don't come, Mrs. Armytage," he said. "There may be danger. In any case your presence would be likely to hamper me."

"What you say about danger quite settles it," replied Marior, moving to the gangway. "Follow me into my boat, please, and pay off your own

boatman. I am not going to lose sight of you, my friend, till you have brought me to Leslie."

Seeing that there was no help for it, Quayne yielded, and while Marion's bluejackets bent their backs to the oars his brain was busy with the question whether, under the altered circumstances, he ought not to ask for a couple of constables before following a trail at the end of which there might be desperate criminals, and, he could not disguise the possibility from himself, a dead victim. Personally he had no fear, but he dreaded the responsibility of bringing Marion face to face with these apostles of the creed of violence.

But he was ever self-reliant in affairs demanding physical courage, and he had beaten the "regulars," as he called them, in so many cases that he shrank from calling them in at the eleventh hour. He had a serviceable little six-chambered friend in his pocket, and on that, in case of need, he determined to rely.

So it was that when they had gained the shore and found Peckthorne waiting with a well-horsed fly, Quayne handed Marion into the vehicle and ordered the driver to take them out to the "Half-way House" at Littleham. Peckthorne sat on the box-seat, so that as they made the momentous journey the detective and his client were free to talk without reserve. Quick question and answer followed on both sides, till each was in possession of the separate happenings on land and sea during the past twenty-four hours.

The smashing of the wireless apparatus on the yacht by Lukyn interested Quayne intensely, as

explaining his failure, as did the subsequent chain which led to the discovery of the infernal machine. Marion, too, heard of Quayne's meeting with Leslie and of their proceedings on the previous evening with bated breath. But when he came to unfold his theory why her husband had given him the slip, as the result of a bargain with Lukyn's inexorable foes, she broke down and wept.

It was, therefore, with glistening eyes that she descended from the fly at the door of the wayside inn to which Peckthorne's acuteness had brought them. She was about to rush impetuously into the house, but Quayne's restraining hand fell on her arm.

"I will go first, if you please," he said.

For his quick eyes had noted a shadow on the blind of the parlour—the shadow of a woman, whose fashionable head-gear and garments, as pictured on the blind, were not what might be expected in that place.

They were in too sharp contrast with the sounds of rustic jollity coming from the tap-room at the other side of the passage to be quite normal.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

LESLIE ARMYTAGE, having descried the tall figure by the sloe bush, went slowly downwards to meet it, never doubting that it was Scorrier Voules. Fayter Frayne was probably lurking in the denser shadows behind him.

But, suddenly, when he was some twenty feet from the dimly-seen shape, a soft glow as from a portable electric torch illuminated it, and a voice, speaking close at hand from the undergrowth, caused the motionless figure to start and utter an inarticulate cry. And it caused Leslie to start also, for the voice, being that of Voules, proved that the man he was addressing could not be he.

Spell-bound, Leslie came to a halt and looked closer. The figure, which he had at first taken for that of the taller Knight of Industry, was that of Nigel Lukyn, who, hatless and coatless, was gazing with an awful face at the speaker, who to Leslie was invisible, hidden by the bush.

"That is well, Nigel Lukyn," Voules' voice came up crisp and clear. "Look me in the eyes—

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"The figure . . . was that of Nigel Lukyn."

The Avengers]

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so. Keep on looking, looking, looking. Now, Fayter—swift and sure, as we promised. I hold him hypnotically fixed, and as unconscious as if he was under gas in a dentist's chair."

And before Leslie could determine what he ought to do, a smaller shape darted forward from the shadows, sprang back again and was lost to view. Nigel Lukyn swayed and fell, and the dry grasses rustled horribly, telling of a death struggle that was over almost as soon as it was begun. The electric lamp shone upon the quivering heap till the muscles ceased to twitch, and was then switched off, leaving only the dimly-seen panorama of starlit sky and sea, with the rugged contour of the landslip in the foreground.

But just as Leslie was about to descend to see if any remnant of life remained, the two Americans emerged from their concealment, and, raising the body, tossed it into one of the quagmires.

"He'll lie there till Judgment," said Voules, as the ooze closed in. "Come, Fayter, our work is done. Let us go and report to Berthe."

"He was a *man*," came Frayne's answer rather shakily. "I'll bet my boots I didn't hurt him, Voules."

For a moment Leslie expected them to meet him in their ascent to the higher ground, but the pair struck into the undergrowth lower down, and he heard their footsteps clambering upwards away to his right. The terrible drama had been enacted so quickly that he had no time to collect his senses, much less speculate as to Lukyn's presence on the spot where he himself had thought

to complete his sacrifice. So dazed was he that he hardly knew now whether he ought not in honour to summon back the murderers and explain to them that they had killed the wrong man.

But then, with clearing mental vision, came the swift perception that they had not killed the wrong man at all, but the one against whom their blood-feud was sworn. He, Leslie Armytage, who had made the bargain with them, had kept the tryst; but by some inscrutable decree the fate he had expected had fallen on him for whom it was intended. He was absolved from paying the price he had offered, for the simple reason that the ruthless creditors had obtained payment from him who really owed the debt.

So he, too, began to grope his way back to the top of the cliff, and, his own immediate surroundings losing interest with every step, he began to wonder how Lukyn had happened to that place—to play the strange part of scapegoat for himself. The only solution he could hit upon was that the *Idalia* had been wrecked by the infernal machine while returning to Exmouth, and that Lukyn, possibly the sole survivor, chancing to swim ashore at that point, had met his death while climbing from the beach below.

"If they have killed Marion they shall not escape," he cried in his anguish, and the thought spurred him to hasten his return to the inn. The tap-room had been full of stalwart countrymen, and it would be easy to hold the Americans till the police could arrive. Yet he must not tread

too closely on the heels of Voules and Frayne, or he might frustrate his own purpose.

As he traversed the deserted and silent lane leading from the coast to the high road, he thought he heard them ahead of him once or twice, and so slackened his pace. Therefore, when he eventually reached the "Halfway House," Scorrier Voules and Fayter Frayne had already come and gone, after reporting to Berthe Roumier the accomplishment of their task. A hurried conference in the parlour of the inn had ended in Voules and Frayne leaving on foot for Exmouth, thence to catch the mail train to London. Berthe was to follow a quarter of an hour later, so that in the very improbable contingency of suspicion resting on the two men there would be no proved connection between them and Berthe.

They had arrived separately at the inn, and separately would have departed. Berthe had been anxious and eager to take the same risks, but now that their purpose was achieved she was quite submissive and ready to obey when the men insisted. All the snap and fire seemed to have suddenly gone out in her.

So it was that when Leslie entered the inn parlour he came upon a girl all unstrung and with traces of tears on her face. From force of habit she was adjusting her hat before the mirror previous to departure, and it was in the mirror that she first saw the reflection of her visitor.

She uttered a little cry, and turned to him shrinkingly, as if approached by one risen from the dead.

"You!" she gasped.

"Yes, me," replied Leslie. It was no time for verbal precision. "Where are the men?"

But Berthe could not speak—she could only look at him and move her lips—and in a few words he explained what had happened—how a murder had been done which he had witnessed; but how he argued from Lukyn's presence there that another and greater crime had to be laid to their door.

"So, you see, if I had been killed instead of that poor wretch I should have given my life and got nothing in return," he finished. "You cannot expect any mercy from me, Mademoiselle Roumier."

"I do not," she made answer, and it was characteristic of her that her coolness had returned with knowledge of the circumstances. "You then are really Mr. Armytage, the 'double' of Lukyn, and told us that you were he in the hope of saving your wife? I will only say from my heart that I would rather suffer the last penalty of your laws than have hurt a hair of your head. Ah, now you will be able to hand me over to justice; here is Mr. Quayne."

For the detective stood in the doorway, his eyes moist with a great relief at seeing Leslie safe and sound. Quayne turned his beaming countenance and spoke to someone behind him, and the next moment all Leslie's vengeful feelings died away as at the touch of a magic wand. For there was his wife, running towards him with outstretched arms, unscathed by any such catas-

trophe as he had pictured, and with her beautiful face eloquent of love and trust.

"Marion!" he cried. "Marion!"

"Leslie—really and truly Leslie! Yes, I know all about you, dearest, and just why and how you have done all the naughty things you have. And you are forgiven for all of them, except for that last wild sacrifice, which you would have made in vain."

And, all unheeding the presence of Quayne and Berthe Roumier's wistful gaze, she pillowed her fair head on her husband's shoulder.

* * * *

When Scorrier Voules foretold that Nigel Lukyn's body would lie hidden till Judgment in the quagmire on "The Floors" he probably spoke a true word. It was John Quayne who, in Marion's interests, advised the policy of "letting the dead past bury its dead," and of allowing Berthe Roumier and her associates to go scot free. To have caused their arrest would have entailed the raking up and sorting over of the strange history of Marion's marriage, by which, as the unhappy maniac could not be brought to life again, nothing would be gained.

Everything made for silence, and circumstances favoured it. The motor-launch in which Lukyn escaped was found broken on the beach below the spot where he was killed, the public being allowed to believe that the madman who had forced his way on to the yacht and so misbehaved himself had been drowned in the sea. The few people on the *Idalia* who knew his name keep

the secret; Captain Crawford, Aunt Jane, and Badger from affection, and Crispin from a selfish fear of consequences. The treacherous maid was of course, discharged, but Quayne keeps his eye on her in her present calling of a dealer in those mysteries known as "ladies' wardrobes."

Marion's new maid is Badger's sister Sue, and in devotion to her generous mistress she is only second to her young brother, whose secret boast it is that he found Mrs. Armytage her husband and kept him alive afterwards.

But as a rising expert in his "profession"—his office-boy days are over now—Badger never boasts aloud.

And as for Marion and Leslie, the flood of sunshine that broke through the storm-clouds of their honeymoon in the inn parlour is never dimmed. Sometimes at Eyot Cottage, where silver Thames threads past the lawn; sometimes at the cosy flat, which Marion still retains, with Aunt Jane purring by the fire; but more often in the *Idalia* on far-off summer seas, the stream of their happy days flows on, and all is peace.

THE END.

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